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# A Step into The Past

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Book 21

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Huang Yi

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## Chapter 1

### Escaping Dragon from the Battlefield

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Just as Xiang Shaolong got rid one batch of enemies, a scream came from his side. He turned around in shock only to see Zhou Liang falling over his horse, with a long spear piercing through his armor from the back and exiting to the front. Obviously the enemy who threw that spear was very strong.

He let out an earth shattering roar and was about to rein his horse to kill his way back but his followers on either side of him tugged at his reins hard, pulling him along as they escaped.

One of the enemy generals, leading a group of soldiers ran after them and shouted, "Xiang Shaolong, where can you run!"

Xiang Shaolong took a look at the surroundings only to see that only less than a hundred of his personal guards are left and the forests around them are all burning bright. He has no idea how many more enemies are out there.

Now that the enemy has caught onto him, it'll be difficult for him to avoid them in this situation. Just as he was about to turn back and avenge Zhou Liang right before he died, there was a shrill screech as Eagle King swooped down from the sky, right into the face of that Zhao general, its sharp beaks pecking at that general's eyes madly.

The Zhao general let out a frightening scream as he abandoned the spear

that he was about to throw and grabbed Eagle King with his hands and both bird and human fell off the horse.

Because their general has met with misfortune, the pursuing army was sudden thrown into sudden chaos.

Xiang Shaolong knows that the Zhao general and Eagle King is as good as dead and felt that this opportunity should not be missed as he urged his horse to give chase.

He has just gone out about seven to eight feet when about a dozen Zhao soldiers came up from the left and right, raising their spears as they yelled and stabbed madly at their horses.

His personal guards on the left and right fell, becoming the target of massacre for the enemy.

At this point in time, Strong Wind executed its extraordinary ability and could actually suddenly pick up speed and dash out of the encirclement. Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt that he is all alone.

Hot blood coursed through Xiang Shaolong's veins as murderous thoughts welled up in him. He killed his way past the dozen odd Zhao soldiers who were charging from the left.

Luckily in this dense forest, arrows are of not much use. Otherwise he won't even have the chance to fight before he's taken down by arrows.

Cries and screams surrounded him, the atmosphere was extremely bleak.

From behind a clump of trees, Xiang Shaolong leaned on one side of Strong Wind as he charged into the enemy formation, waving his blade and slashing towards the opposing soldiers.

His target is the one right in front holding the torch and illuminating the path. Hundred Battles Blade slashed diagonally at that person's shoulder and fresh blood spewed immediately as he fell off his horse.

The torch fell to the grass and immediately started burning.

As the enemy were still screaming, Xiang Shaolong's strength seems to increase as he charged into their midst and waved his blade as he chopped and slashed.

The enemy hurriedly pulled out their swords to block him but did not expect their long swords to immediately break into halves as Hundred Battle Blade sliced through with an icy sheen. The Zhao soldiers fell. Xiang Shaolong dispersed the enemy and naturally killed his way towards where the light is the weakest.

By now the enemy has gained an overwhelming advantage. Although there are still skirmishes around him, it can no longer change the situation at hand.

A feeling of fatigue welled up in Xiang Shaolong.

Witnessing the death of Zhou Liang and so many of his men, he had the

thought that he will not live alone. He gritted his teeth, turned his horse around as he ran back towards where the battle cries are the loudest. In a short instant he is out of the woods into the open plains.

Amidst the scattered trees, a group of a few hundred Qin soldiers were right in front, surrounded by thousands of enemy and fighting to their last breath.

Fury welled up in Xiang Shaolong as the murderous intent magnified again and he decided to go all the way out, slashing anyone in his way. The enemies who met him only ended up dead in an instant.

The Qin army saw that their Commander has returned and their morale was greatly boosted. Following in his bravado, they actually managed to fight their way out of the enemy's encirclement and ran towards a small hill up ahead.

Just as war cries were rising behind them, the small hill up ahead were suddenly lit with hundreds of torches.

Countless Zhao soldiers swarmed down from the top of the hill, each of them carrying weapons for long distance fighting, which are precisely the weapons that are the bane to cavalry like Xiang Shaolong and his men.

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed, knowing that Li Mu has covered all bases in his plan and have set up one obstacle after another in the woods long ago with the sole goal of apprehending and killing him.

By this time anyone would know that it is over for them and without waiting

foe his orders, half of his men started escaping towards the two sides.

Xiang Shaolong could not stop them in time but knows in his heart that the enemy is deliberately forcing them to run towards the south.

Suddenly, he knows very clearly that as long as they can charge their way up to the top of the hill, there'll be a chance where they can escape into the hilly terrain and extricate themselves from danger.

By now there are only 50 odd men by his side. He immediately shouted, "If you want to live then come with me!"

He kept Hundred Battles Blade back into its sheath on his back and pulled out the flying needles around his waist as he clasped the horse with his thighs and charged, both his hands continuously throwing out needles. The enemy soldiers all fell to the ground as they were hit by the needles.

Amidst the chaos, Xiang Shaolong had thrown out close to a hundred flying needles, until both his arms were numb. By then he had used up all his needles and behind him corpses filled the ground, a distressing sight.

By now only about a dozen odd men were with him but they have successfully gone up the top of the hill.

Hundreds of enemy soldiers were attacking them madly like preying wolves and tigers.

Once again Xiang Shaolong took out Hundred Battles Blade.

By now his body was filled with a dozen odd large and small bleeding wounds but he could not feel any pain at all.

As he waved his precious blade, screams were heard and the corpses of his enemy on the fight filled the ground.

Without even looking, Xiang Shaolong slashed behind him and killed another enemy who was coming up on him from the back.

In front of him, a person ran up on foot with a spear and aimed it straight at Strong Wind's neck.

Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to throw his precious blade and aimed it instead at that person's chest and pin him to the ground.

He felt a sudden heart-rending pain behind his shoulder blade, something had struck him.

Xiang Shaolong was in so much pain he collapsed on the back of his horse and his guards risked their lives to charge their way to him and cover him.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking to himself that this is the end.

In that instant, he thought of his beloved wives and concubines far away in Xianyang, and also thought of Lady Ni, Zhao Ya, Zhao Qian and countless people and incidents.

Just at this moment of life and death, he could feel Strong Wind dodging left and right as it kept increasing its speed and ran.

The battle cries were gradually getting fainter behind him.

Darkness was surrounding him.

He held Strong Wind's neck in a death grip, feeling as one with his horse. His consciousness gradually faded and he finally lost all senses.

He regained consciousness slowly and suddenly woke up in shock, only to feel his entire body racked with pain and felt extreme thirst.

He can't help but groan and open his eyes.

The autumn sun hung in the middle of the empty sky.

For a brief moment, not only does Xiang Shaolong have no idea where he is, he's also not sure what had actually happened.

He sat up with much difficulty and was shocked to see Strong Wind collapsed on its side a few feet away, its neck twisted in an unnatural position, its nose and mouth filled with foamy fluids which had solidified.

Xiang Shaolong felt his whole body shaking as he finally remembered what happened last night before he fainted.

Strong Wind had carried him and escaped from the battlefield and sacrificed

its own life in order to save his.

Ever since Ji Yanran gave him the horse, he has spent more time with Strong Wind than with any of his beloved ladies.

It's loyalty to him has never changed and reduced at all.

Xiang Shaolong can no longer control his emotions as he hugged Strong Wind's body and cried manly tears!

He has lost.

Lost to the most famous general of that era, Li Mu.

That's not because he has planned poorly, but because Li Mu is too smart.

Now his only hope is that he has successfully hindered Li Mu from catching up with the troops led by Teng and Jing before they can reach Zhongmou, otherwise their decoy troops that was meant to look like they're attacking Handan will be totally wiped out.

Luckily this time around the person in charge is the mature and stable Teng Yi who is capable of handling any situation.

If it was Jing Jun, he'll definitely turn back to save them and it would be akin to suicide.

It's a miracle that he's able to survive this time.

He can imagine that Li Mu will certainly dispatch his men to search for his whereabouts.

Once he thought of this, Xiang Shaolong felt a surge of instinct to survive. He first checked his injuries and can't help but thank Uncle Qing for making, and Qin Qing for sewing this armor for him. Although he was struck by a few arrows and hit by swords many times, there were only three spots which split open and he only suffered superficial injuries, with the wound behind his shoulder blades to be the deepest. The other injuries were all on his arms and limbs and were all superficial injuries which will not hinder his movement.

He removed his bag from Strong Wind's body and took out the clothes inside. He beared with the pain as he peeled off his armor and clothes which had stuck to his flesh and dried blood. He tore off pieces of cloth and bandaged his wounds. After changing into the daily wear that warriors usually wear and securing the climbing equipment around his waist, his mood turned a little for the better.

After emptying the clean water in the bottle that Strong Wind was carrying, he took off the precious sword 'Blood Wave' that was tied around the reins and remembered that this is a famous sword that was once given to him by Li Mu. Conflicting feelings surged up in him unexpectedly.

By now it is getting dark. He had wanted to spend some effort to bury Strong Wind, or at least cover him with some soil but he could hear hooves-beat coming from somewhere far away. He had no choice but to bow respectfully

at Strong Wind's body to express his thanks before starting on his escape with feelings of devastation and extreme sadness.

He is extremely familiar with travelling in the wilderness. Initially, whenever he ascends to a high point, he'll be able to see the torches of his pursuers.

They are like the grim reaper, entangling him in such a way that he is unable to determine what is the correct direction to Zhongmou.

By dawn, although he has temporarily thrown off his pursuers, he was totally lost and could only run towards the mountain cliffs.

When he was sitting down and resting at a dense forest at the top of a hill, his whole body felt as if it's falling apart. Not only is his mind in turmoil, his body is extremely exhausted.

Blood was oozing out of many of his wounds and the pain was unbearable. The feeling of utter defeat is enough to make anyone despair.

If not for the fact that he had undergone strict special task force training in the past, he surely will not be able to pull himself together at this point in time.

But he knows that this moment is the most important point in the route of escape.

Because it's easy for the enemy to find out where Strong Wind had collapsed and died, so they'll definitely make use of the opportunity that he is on foot

and unable to travel far to push on the search for him. If he were to fall asleep now, he may end up in the hands of the enemy by the time he wakes up.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, gathered his spirits and after a short recovery of his energy, meditated according to the Mohist meditation method.

In a short while, he was calm and his whole body relaxed and during that time his energy was recovered swiftly. After about an hour of such meditation, he jumped up and used his strong sense of willpower to overcome the exhaustion his body is feeling and continued on his flight for life.

He deliberately picked routes at the cliffs where beasts and men will find difficult to cover and used his climbing gear to move along. This is surely a move that his enemies will never expect. Otherwise if he were to choose to travel on flat open wilderness, how can he ever outrun horses on four legs.

Once it's dark, he rested next to a waterfall, his whole body in so much pain that he can't even move his fingers.

In a short instant he was fast asleep and by the time he woke up the sun was gradually rising.

His ears first heard the swooshing of the waterfall, mixed with the sounds made by insects and birds. The scene around him was serene. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and sat up only to see the waterfall on his left coming down

from the cliff high above in a silvery cascade, the lake next to him foaming with white bubbles as the water crashed down on its surface, crashing back to the side of the cliff again in tight circles. The scene was magnificent.

He looked at his surroundings again to see countless mountains surrounding the area with trees growing wildly.

Xiang Shaolong can't help but be impressed and wondered why had he not noticed that the scenery here is so special yesterday?

Inspired by the surroundings where opportunities for survival abound, he felt a strong surge of drive and vowed to live to return to the people who love and care for him.

In the past, when he lost contact with Tao Fang at the Zhao border after they ran into horse thieves, there was a period of time where he was roaming around in the wilderness. So now he is of course familiar with it and is able to pick wild vegetables to curb his hunger.

He thought that he may be the first human to ever step foot in this desolate wilderness and a sense of satisfaction welled up in him.

The place where Li Mu ambushed him is around the borders of Zhao and Wei, north of the city walls of the state of Zhao, so it's a higher possibility that he is right now within the borders of Wei. Once he ascends the peak nearby and can have a further look, he would be able to find the easily identifiable Yellow River or maybe the route he took in the past when he went to Wei from Zhao. From there he will be able to determine his plan to

return to Zhongmou.

Once he thought of this, his spirits lifted and once he decided on the highest mountain peak nearby, he gritted his teeth and climbed his way up.

He can't help but be thankful that he had been practicing martial arts every day for the past few years, otherwise by now he won't have the stamina to go on further.

But when he saw the wild eagles circling around the top of the mountains, he can't help but be reminded of Zhou Liang who died in the battle and the loyal Eagle King who died for its owner and he could feel hot tears brimming in his eyes.

Are humans naturally selfish creatures? For various gains, they will rally around the excuse of protecting the country and the people and keep on killing one another. What's the point of all these?

What is most hateful is that he is part of such killing wars.

In a war, there's no one who can truly win. Even the victorious will have to pay a terrible price to win.

Such an outcome has been laid down in stone since time memorial and no one can change it but wars are still continuing without a stop.

Even if under a unified power, power struggles and murders have never really stopped.

Before dusk, he has ascended one of the peaks and the great land lay before his eyes.

He was immediately stunned by what he saw.

The remaining light from the setting sun cast a sad yet beautiful glow upon the vast land below as it stretched into the horizon.

Behind it there were grand mountains and cliffs, looking dangerous yet magnificent.

Although he could see a river winding along the valley, he is certain that it is not the Yellow River.

Far away towards the left he could vaguely make out terraced fields on a hilly slope. As it is now autumn, the harvesting period, the golden fields look especially outstanding when framed against the lush green wilderness.

Behind the hill, smoke was rising from chimneys, and it looks as if there could be a small village of sorts over there.

Xiang Shaolong was hesitant. He was sure he's never been to this place and the only way now is to ask for directions along the way but that may also reveal his whereabouts.

That night, he slept among the crevices of a huge stone and the next morning he tried to look for a route down the mountain. Only then did he understand

why there is a saying, 'going up the mountain is easier than coming down the mountain'.

After much difficulty, he finally managed to arrive at the foot of the mountain after noon.

He has finally decided to go to that village and have a look and travelled towards there through the night. By now his clothes are tattered and torn in many places and he has not shaven for days. He looked absolutely like a destitute vagabond.

Although he is on the run, but amidst the wilderness, looking at the rivers and streams with the vibrant yellow and red colors of the autumn forests, the scene is extremely beautiful. The scenic route also helped to elevate his feelings of loneliness.

From the top of the mountain, those chimney smokes looked very near but after walking for half a day, there was still no sight of the village.

Before the sky got dark, he plucked some wild vegetables to stave his hunger and spent the night next to a small lake.

He slept until the middle of the night when suddenly there were sounds of dogs barking and human voices.

Xiang Shaolong woke up in shock and knew that something is amiss. He hurriedly broke off a hollow reed nearby and hid amongst the weeds in the lake, breathing thru the reed.

He had just hidden himself when a team of a hundred odd men came right to the edge of the lake with hunting dogs.

The dogs were frantically sniffing the area where he was sleeping.

He heard someone say, “Xiang Shaolong must have been here and ran away when he heard the dogs barking. If we can capture him this time, just the reward alone is enough for us to spend for the rest of our lives.”

Xiang Shaolong heard the Han accent in their speech and was stunned. Now he knows that when Strong Wind ran, he actually brought him within the Han border so if he just continue travelling towards the West, he’ll reach the Qin borders sooner or later.

But then he thought about it again. Since the Hans are certain he is within their borders, they’ll naturally barricade the paths leading towards Qin so if he travel Westward, he’ll just be falling right into their trap.

The only way now is to hide until the danger is gone, until the enemy relaxes their guard before trying to find a way to return to the Qin border.

At this point in time, someone came right up to the edge of the lake shining a torch, reflecting the surface of the lake into a sea of red.

One of the men laughed, “If you were him, won’t you try to run away quickly?”

Someone else answered, “But the dogs keep barking, maybe he’s still hiding nearby. Why don’t we release the dogs and let them run after him, won’t that save us much effort?”

Such a suggestion was immediately met with agreement by everyone else.

The ropes were loosened and five to six hunting dogs shot towards the forest next to the lake like arrows, followed by the sounds of a fight between a howling wolf and the barking dogs, the sound gradually getting fainter.

Only now did the pursuing soldiers realize that they have been misled, the hounds were running after a nearby wolf and not Xiang Shaolong. They all ran shouting after the dogs.

Xiang Shaolong climbed up back to shore, all wet and knows that he has now become the number one war criminal which the six states have all put a bounty on. Unless he returns to Qin, otherwise no matter how big the world is, there won’t be a place for him. He dare not stop and gave up the thought of going towards the village to ask for directions. He turned around and went towards the east, going further and further away from Qin.

That night, he escaped back to the mountainous regions and started climbing cliffs and mountains again. Luckily most of the state of Han is filled with mountainous terrain, otherwise his enemies would have caught up with him long ago.

Now that he knows that he is in the state of Han, he took a closer look at his surroundings and could slowly make out some recognizable mountains and

rivers. He was ecstatic and travelled towards the Jing family village, the place where Jing Jun was born.

Three days later, the familiar scene of the Jing family village appeared before his eyes.

By now he is skinny beyond recognition and weak but he is finally relieved and could no longer hold on as he collapsed into a dead faint.

## Chapter 2

### Risky Moves

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When Xiang Shaolong work up, he realized he's lying on a wooden bed in a village hut. Medication was applied to the wounds on his body and he's changed into clean clothes. Such a feeling of comfort is really indescribable.

The village lady who was waiting by his bed saw him wake up and ran out in shock to call the others.

In a short while, the village leader Jing Nian and a few village elders came. They all treated him with the respect due to a deity. After listening to him relate what happened, Jing Nian said, "We did send out our men to find information. The soldiers are still searching for Master Xiang. We heard that if Master Xiang is captured, there is a reward of a hundred pieces of gold so they are all trying their best.

Xiang Shaolong sat up, eating the food on the bed and asking at the same time, "Does the whole village know that I am here?"

Jing Nian replied, "We won't be so careless, a person's heart is unfathomable. Luckily the person who found Master Xiang unconscious outside our village is my son, so only the few of us know about Master Xiang."

Another elder Jing Xiong added, "Master Xiang, just rest assured and stay

here to tend to your injuries. Once the matter dies down a little, we'll assign men to send you back to Qin."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "To return to Qin from here is even more difficult than ascending heaven. Also, I can't stay here for long or I will bring you catastrophe."

Jing Xiong said, "In that case our whole clan might as well accompany Master Xiang back to Qin." All the elders nodded their head vigorously in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Of course I will welcome all of you to Qin, but now is not the right time. It'll have to wait until I return to Qin, that's the only way to ensure nothing will happen."

Another elder asked, "Then what should we do now?"

Xiang Shaolong thought hard for a while before answering, "I'll have to trouble you to send out someone who is agile and totally trustworthy to go to Zhongmou and inform Teng Yi and Jing Jun that I am safe but can only go back after a period of time. Tell them to lead the army well and wait patiently."

Jing Xiong said, "That is easy, our villagers frequently go to Zhongmou to pick herbs. Not only are they familiar with the route, they are also friendly with the people there so they definitely won't raise any suspicion."

Xiang Shaolong was relieved of one issue and said, "The soldiers will search their way here sooner or later. There are a lot of talents amongst the people

after me. You can use my clothes and items to create an illusion that I have ran somewhere else. This will buy us another two to three days and I can take this time to recover and start my escape.”

After some discussion, Jing Xiong and the elders all left the room.

Xiang Shaolong fell into a deep sleep and by the time he woke up it was the middle of the night and all was quiet except for the howling wind outside and the barking dogs. He can't help but feel his emotions go on a roller coaster ride.

The first time he came to this place, it was the middle of winter and with him at that time was the royal Zhao Princess, Zhao Qian. They spent a loving night in each other's arms then but how can they predict that their destiny will end with Zhao Qian's horrible death.

He can't help but feel a deep hatred for Lu Buwei welling up inside him.

He screamed in his heart: No matter what! I, Xiang Shaolong must return to Xianyang alive and witness Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne and Lu Buwei's horrible end.

When day broke, Jing Nian came with news that will make him glad.

Turns out that although his 2,000 strong army was totally exterminated, but their sacrifice was worth it, for it allowed the main bulk of the Qin army to return to Zhongmou safely. Right now Li Mu's army is surrounding and attacking Zhongmou but there are news that he has suffered quite a lot of

casualties as well.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved. They had predicted that the Zhaos will launch a counter-attack at Zhongmou so they've already stocked up on grains and fortified the city walls. Besides, with Huan Qi's army to support them, even if the enemy is Li Mu, he'll not find it easy to reclaim Zhongmou.

With Li Mu's intelligence, the only way for him ultimately is to retreat back to Changcheng.

Jing Nian added, "I sent someone to Zhongmou yesterday, so there won't be any problem with this issue. Hai!"

Xiang Shaolong knows that something is on his mind and said with a smile, "You're elderly, please speak your mind."

Jing Nian said, "Master Xiang is right. Another troop of soldiers went to the Shang family village 50 miles from here yesterday and they were searching and snatching things, even injuring a few of their people. The Shang family village saw that there were a lot of soldiers so they dare not make any comments although they were furious."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed and asked, "How long will it take to travel from there to here?"

Jing Nian said, "At least 2 days. Master Xiang can wait until tomorrow morning before you leave."

He paused and added, "It seems that the Han Wang'an have sent out a team of people from Nanzheng of Ducheng who are expert in tracking in the wilderness to search for Master Xiang. Some of our people came back from Nanzheng and said that the two states of Zhao and Han already have secret meetings to discuss how to capture you."

He took out a map from his sleeve and passed it to Xiang Shaolong, saying, "I drew this map personally over the last two days. It may be a little rough but I daresay that it's generally correct."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed. He got dressed and came down the bed, feeling more than half of his energy coming back. If he have another day's rest, he'll have higher confidence that he will be able to escape.

The two of them sat down at the corner of a table and opened up the map to study it.

Jing Nian pointed at a cross in the middle of the map and said, "This is our Jing family village. On the upper right corner at the northeast, about a hundred miles away is the Capital of Han, Nanzheng. Another 200 miles northeast from there, that's the Capital of the state of Wei, Daliang."

Xiang Shaolong said, "I'll burn this map immediately after I'm done seeing it. Otherwise if someone else gets a hand on this map, they'll know that you have been protecting me."

Jing Nian's expression changed slightly, for this is a point that he had never considered.

After Xiang Shaolong let Jing Nian explain in detail the river and mountain terrain drawn on the map, he kept the map and said, "It's best that even Grandpa Nian doesn't know my escape route, then you won't be able to accidentally reveal anything and incur other people's suspicions."

Jing Nian nodded his head gladly.

Xiang Shaolong made the best use of time to rest and when he woke up, he memorized the map. After much thought and deliberation, he finally decided to take the risky route and go towards the Wei border before returning to the State of Zhao where he is most familiar with. After that he will travel west towards Tunliu and meet up with Huan Qi and he'll be able to accomplish his grand plan of thousand miles escape.

Once he's sure that he has remembered all the details on the map, he burned it.

After dinner, Xiang Shaolong decided to travel while it's dark. Jing Nian has already prepared rations, water, clothes and also collected a small amount of money for him as well.

Most interestingly, Jing Xiong gave him a rabbit in a bamboo cage and explained, "This is a simple way to deal with the hounds. As hunting dogs are very sensitive to a rabbit's scent, their scent can cover the scent emitted from a human body. If the hunting dogs sniff out the rabbit and come after you, just release the rabbit and let it lure the hunting dogs into a wild chase."

Jing Nian added, “We’ve discussed, after Master Xiang leaves, we’ll abandon the village and move to the middle of the mountains to avoid trouble.

Regarding Xiao Jun’s move to the State of Qin, some news have more or less leaked out. Since the officials have gone to the Shang family village, maybe they’ll find out about this so even if Master Xiang has never been here, they may still vent their anger on us.”

Xiang Shaolong felt apologetic and asked, “When do you plan to leave?”

Jing Nian replied, “We will delay no further. Once Master Xiang leaves we’ll pack up immediately and move.”

After bidding one another farewells, Xiang Shaolong carried the possible scapegoat, the rabbit and once again started on his escape journey.

Xiang Shaolong rode on the healthy horse that Jing Nian gave him and travelled a distance towards Daliang in the northeast. As he did not want the horse to be over exhausted, he stopped to let the horse rest.

He can still make out the lights and lanterns in the Jing family village a distant away.

This horse is very intuitive as it just breathed quietly on the plains, not making any whinnying sounds at all.

He plans to spend 3 days with this horse.

Once they pass the flat plains, he will go into the mountainous area on foot.

That would be much safer.

Honestly, he does not believe that anyone will be able to follow him in a mountainous area.

But if not for the Jing family village offering him refuge and a chance to take a break as well as getting food, horse, bows and arrows and some necessities, the Hans may very well have caught up with him by now.

After all there is a limit to one's endurance.

He can't help but feel positive as he thought of the scene when he's finally reunited with Teng, Jing and the rest, until his safe return to Xianyang to be welcomed by his beloved wife, maids and son.

Suddenly he could hear hoofbeats coming from the front.

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed as he flew up his horse and galloped up to the top of a nearby hill so that he can take a good look at the situation.

About 5 miles away, what looks like a fire dragon that was made up of torches was snaking its way here, their destination must likely to be the Jing family village.

Xiang Shaolong's limbs went cold immediately.

Jing Nian's concern is not for nothing, the enemy has indeed gotten news from the Shang family village and knows that someone from the Jing family

village has gone to Xianyang.

In this era there's not a lot of people with the family name Jing and it'll be easy to guess their way to Jing Jun and Jing Shan. Otherwise why would the enemy rush there in the night?

If Xiang Shaolong is a selfish person, he will run away with no hesitation at this very moment, the further he can run the better. But how can he escape by himself.

Just as he was feeling at a loss, he suddenly had an idea. He got hold of an opportunity and galloped towards a dense forest that the enemy must pass through to go to the Jing family village and took out his fire starter to start fire on several spots.

If it's spring or summer, this plan would not have worked. But now the wind is blowing and the atmosphere is dry. The light from the stars illuminated the plains and in a short while the fire spread and thick smoke rushed up to the sky.

Not only can this fire prevent the enemy from moving forward, it can also convey a most powerful message to the people at the Jing family village and urge them to leave faster.

Xiang Shaolong was worried that they won't run after him so he deliberately made the horse ran loudly and swiftly on the plains towards the northeast.

He'd rather lose his own life than to let anyone in the Jing family village come

to any harm.

By the time it's dawn the next day, Xiang Shaolong is still riding on the endless plains but he has already slowed down.

This time, he deliberately revealed his whereabouts to lure the enemy to run after him so that they will have no time to deal with the people in Jing family village. If his opponent has expert trackers, this plan of his will be a very dangerous one.

From time to time he will come across rivers or streams in his way. Such pretty scenery which during normal circumstances is a feast to the eyes, have not become his obstacles instead.

Luckily right until now there's no sight of the pursuing enemy. If such a situation continues, he will be able to safely reach the unpopulated mountainous areas at the Han and Wei border.

The Weis will never expect that instead of going west towards Qin, he'd actually travel east towards the Han border so they certainly won't put up their guards there. By then he'll be able to travel back to Tunliu via the Han border.

The horse is foaming at the mouth by now and Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to stop and stand guard at a high area to let the horse graze and drink at a small stream below the slope.

He has no appetite for food at all but to preserve his energy, he had no

choice but to force himself to swallow two mouthfuls of dried meat.

The taste is actually not too bad.

These past few years, there were very little occasions for him to be roaming in the wilderness alone and he can't help but think about his strange time travel encounter.

In a blink of an eye, it's been seven years.

During these years, even those closest to him like Ji Yanran, Teng Yi etc does not know his secret. He can only keep this piece of earth shattering secret that he is actually from the 21st century deep in his heart.

As for Xiao Pan's secret, there's still Teng Yi and Wu Tingfang who knows.

He is very clear on what Xiao Pan's fate will be, because Xiao Pan will become Emperor Qin, the one who built and unified China.

But he is totally unclear about his own fate.

Even the question of returning to Xianyang alive is an unknown right at this moment.

Just as he was pondering, he could hear hoof beats coming from afar again.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked and looking over, his countenance changed immediately.

He saw that near the woods about two miles away, about 50 odd healthy horses were galloping at full speed but only half of the horses have riders while the others were without saddles.

From the way that the horses can run so neatly and swiftly behind the main group without being leashed, he knows that, not only are these horses quality horses but also well trained warhorses.

After so many years of experience, he has learnt how to differentiate people by their riding skills.

These 27 riders could still weave left and right effortlessly in such mountainous and unfamiliar terrain, he knew that they are all first rated riders.

The worst thing is that his riding and archery skills are still his weakest. On such flat terrain and with them having back up horses to switch to, if they manage to catch up with him, he won't even have the chance to retaliate. The enemy can catch up with him so quickly, so they must be expert trackers. Maybe these are the ones that Jing Nian heard, the experts under specific orders by Han Wang'an to arrest him.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed his surroundings, gritted his teeth and dashed down the slope. He jumped onto the horse's back and quietly muttered 'Sorry, horse', as he urged the horse to gallop around the small hill and run for his life.

His destination is the dense forest at the end of the flat plains. If he can make his way there, he'll be able to make use of the surroundings there to have a life and death battle with the enemy. He will not sit there and be killed and sully the reputation of the best special task force warrior of the 21st century.

Xiang Shaolong removed his gear from the horse and used a cloth to tie two heavy stones which is about his weight and hung it on the horse's saddle. After that he used a sharp knife and pierced into the horse's buttock.

The horse screamed and galloped into the dense forest with the stones on it.

By now the pursuing enemy is about half a mile away. If not for the fact that Xiang Shaolong stepped into the stream and travelled about half a mile along it so that the enemy will not be able to find his footsteps, they may already have caught up with him.

But since the enemy can still follow him, it means that they obviously have very outstanding trackers among them.

He dare not hesitate and hurriedly carried his luggage and ran deep into the forest.

After walking for a while, he could hear hoof beats passing him from behind and quickly fading away.

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief as he sped up and ran towards a tall hill in the forest.

Even if he came upon vines or roots blocking his way, he dare not use his sword to cut them away for fear of leaving traces behind.

He has gone for about a hundred odd feet when he could hear the hoof beats hurriedly returning from the way they left, straight towards his position.

Xiang Shaolong calmed down instead at this time.

As a member of the special task force, it is a requirement and an iron rule that one must keep calm in the face of impending danger.

He quietly analyzed the situation and thought that since the enemy could tell that it's a trap, he is sure that they are not only relying on hoof prints to pursue him. Just as he was feeling perplexed, he heard barking coming nearer and nearer and from the sound of it, there's only one dog.

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly enlightened and was feeling ecstatic instead of shocked. He hid himself among some thick bushes, squatted down and removed the bamboo cage with the rabbit from his back and waited patiently.

By now the sky is slowly getting darker. Xiang Shaolong took out his dagger and peeped through the leaves, totally concentrating on the movements outside.

The dog barks stopped only to hear hasty footsteps coming nearer as the enemies abandoned their horses to go on foot.

In a short while, more than ten odd black shadows that were spread out came slowly towards him from about 30 feet away, with one of them holding on to a leash with a small dog at the other end, barking madly as it strained towards his hiding place.

Xiang Shaolong quietly opened the cage.

The rabbit was already trembling in fear when it heard the barks earlier and now that it saw an escape route, it shot out like an arrow and ran off towards the left.

That dog was indeed instantly alert and turned towards that direction, barking and running madly.

The person holding the leash shouted, "Hurry! Spot is running towards that direction!"

The enemy all ran after it.

Once Xiang Shaolong has made sure that all the enemy has retreated, he jumped up and followed after them, quietly thinking to himself, 'Don't blame me for being ruthless but in such a situation, there's no place for mercy at all.'

## **Chapter 3**

### **Surrounded By Enemies**

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Grasping Bloodwave, Xiang Shaolong overtook an enemy soldier who was lagging behind the rest. He reached from behind to cover his enemy's mouth while Blood Wave pierced the enemy's neck from the side. The enemy only struggled a moment before taking his last breath. Xiang Shaolong handily took over his crossbow and bolts. The rest of the enemies ahead were focused on the path the pursuing dog had gone. The day had also darkened to the point where it was difficult to spot the path, hence the enemies were oblivious to the God of Death pressing from the rear. When Xiang Shaolong had used the same tactic to dispatch the next enemy soldier, the rest of the enemies had halted at a grass patch. A ten-foot high pile of rocks was blocking the path. Apparently, the rabbit was hiding in there somewhere, compelling the dog to pounce and howl continuously. One person shouted "Light the torches!" At this moment, Xiang Shaolong had already used the cover of the trees to sneak up on one of the men, dragged him aside and murdered him while seizing the crossbow in his hand.

Five torches ignited, dyeing the jungle blood-red. All around, ancient trees reached to the sky. As the tall trees cut-off the sunlight all year round, only a few creepers managed to grow on the ground. The only exception was a ten feet wide clump of shrubbery, presenting an obvious target. The remaining twenty four enemies had their crossbows tensed and ready to fire. The leader of the enemies shouted towards the shrubbery: "Xiang Shaolong, you can forget about escaping this time. Come out obediently, else we will burn

you till you have no remains left." The dog had been recalled by its master with a low shout and had stopped barking. It had even lain down submissively, extremely obedient.

Xiang Shaolong surveyed the situation and saw that the men were standing close to each other and were illuminated by the torches. It would be difficult to repeat his ploy of attacking from behind. Taking advantage of the crackling from the torches, he took out his climbing hook and shot it over a branch on the tree beside him. Naturally the rabbit in the undergrowth did not respond to the man's shout. However those men appeared unwilling to set fire to the brush for fear of causing collateral damage [I don't actually understand this...]. After abusing him for a while more, one of the men took a look around and exclaimed in surprise: "Yi! Where is Dian Cheng?" Xiang Shaolong emerged from behind the tree and replied "I am here!". As everyone turned towards him in shock, the crossbows in his left and right arms emitted their terrifying twang. Two of the men carrying torches were pierced in the chest and fell. Their torches also fell to the ground.

When the enemies finally returned fire, Xiang Shaolong had dodged behind the large tree and climbed up with his apparatus. As he was hidden amidst the thick leaves and branches, the rest of the men thought he was still taking cover behind the tree. They spread out and surrounded the tree. The fallen torches had started two bush fires which spread rapidly, creating a lot of thick smoke. Xiang Shaolong first retrieved his hook and then shot it towards the branches of another large tree about twenty feet away. Securing the hook, he then surveyed the situation from his vantage point, awaiting the enemies' response.

Coughing sounds emanated and the dog whimpered. Four of the men were compelled forward by the fire and smoke, and were about to dash towards Xiang Shaolong's original hiding place behind the tree when Xiang Shaolong fired the crossbows in his hands. Two enemies collapsed immediately.

The bushfire had now increased greatly with thick smoke everywhere, obscuring Xiang Shaolong's line of sight. After shooting down another enemy, he hurriedly traversed to the other tree in the air using the already secured hook. The enemies had now reached the tree he was originally at under the cover of smoke, only to discover that there was no one there. Meanwhile, three more enemies had been shot down by him. Of the twenty seven enemies originally, nine had been felled by his guerrilla tactics. The remaining men had also been frightened into scattering and hiding, and no longer had their former fighting spirit.

Xiang Shaolong had achieved his objective and traversed to an even further tree before nimbly rappelling back to ground. He ran towards the direction where the enemies' horses' hoof sounds had previously stopped. Slightly more than an hour later, he finally exited the woods. Close to fifty war horses were tied up just outside the woods. It was already midnight and the moon was high in the sky, filling the land with a mysterious atmosphere. After selecting a strong horse, he cut the ropes on the rest and lashed them all together. He then lightly poked one of the horse's thigh with Blood Wave. The horse neighed in pain and ran off together with the rest of the horses shoving and pulling. Xiang Shaolong hopped on the remaining horse, but it was a while before he was able to control the horse and ride away freely.

Three days later, while crossing a prairie, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly

ditched his horse and crossed the Wei-Han border. His mood was now greatly improved, feeling as if he were on a sight-seeing tour. Between the Wei capitol Daliang and the Han capitol Nanheng lay Zhongmu, which was at present only 100 miles North of where he was. Xiang Shaolong had to exert a large amount of his self-control before he could suppress his strong urge to head straight to the refuge in Zhongmu. That would of-course be most unwise and reckless.

The weather had gradually turned cold. Fortunately, Jing Nian had prepared Winter clothing for him, allowing him to avoid suffering in the cold. He walked for five days before reaching the outskirts of Lianshan district. The rising sun emerged in the East. Sunshine sprinkled over the ridges and plains, finishing the grass and trees in yellow, presenting a scene of boundless vitality. Nearby was a lake. As the cold wind blew over, the water rippled and the reflection of the trees danced in a delightfully colourful pattern, causing Xiang Shaolong to be even more carefree and relaxed, forgetting his situation as a fugitive.

Lush primeval forests and dense undergrowth, endless wild meadows and marshland surrounding a lake resembling a large mirror, truly a wonderful scenery. Many tents were pitched on the meadow beside the lake. Large numbers of horses and sheep were also leisurely grazing on the grassland. The atmosphere was harmonious and peaceful. Xiang Shaolong watched for a long time before collecting his thoughts, and headed towards Daliang. He naturally wouldn't walk right into a trap by heading for Daliang directly, but intended to reach the outskirts of Daliang before using the previous route he had taken from Zhao to Daliang to enter the Zhao border. Even though he had to go in a big circle, it was the safest route he could think of.

Two hours later, he was on a prairie deep within the Wei border. He recalled on the night of the ambush, Ji Feng must have borne him close to three hundred miles in escape, from his location then, to the Zhao-Wei border and then to the mountain range near the Jing family village before collapsing in exhaustion. Presently, he could be said to be in familiar ground.

After walking Northeast for another six hours, he heard hoof beats ahead. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly hid himself. A moment later, a close to twenty strong squad of Wei soldiers galloped into view. They ascended a nearby hill, raised camp and posted sentries. Xiang Shaolong felt his scalp numb, his heart exclaiming in dismay. The Wei people must have received news that he was alive and had possibly escaped here.

The fact was, whether he headed to Zhongmu or Daliang, it would be open plains all the way. The Weis would certainly be familiar with their own territory and would only need to post sentries on all the high points. If he was even slightly careless, his route would be revealed and it would be difficult for him to avoid the consequences of capture. The enemy had evidently just started their operations. Once the sentry post had been established, they would certainly start a blanket search of the entire area. With fast horses and hunting dogs searching for him, he could forget about escaping with his life. Most vexing was the fact that there were several large rivers on his path to Daliang. The Weis would only need to post sentries along the river, then he would not have the confidence to sneak across even at night. Pondering this, he nonetheless knew he had to forge ahead. The alternative was to return to the mountains, which was not an option. At the moment, the danger would not be any less returning to the Han border or

heading South to Chu territory. The question was whether he should steel himself and dash North to Zhongmu. He could then regroup with Teng Yi and Jing Jun in a matter of days. This thought was now even more enticing than before, but he also knew that that was the most dangerous of all routes.

Xiang Shaolong continued this internal struggle on where to proceed until the sun set in the West. In the end, he resolved to explore the route to Zhongmu. Only if he could not find a way past the blockade would he head East towards Daliang, following his original plan to return to Qin via Zhao. Having made the decision, he felt more relaxed. He took another hour to bypass the enemy's sentry post before continuing North towards Zhongmu.

Before reaching Zhongmu, he needed to pass by another Wei city "Jiao Cheng". Naturally he would not think of entering the city. He had to be extra careful to avoid being discovered by the city's defenders. Relying on his Special Forces training, he covered thirty miles before daybreak, running until his legs ached. In the end, he hid in a patch of dense jungle to rest. Not letting down his guard, he exerted more effort to climb up a large tree and concealing himself in its thick foliage before lying down on a branch and closing his eyes to rest. This tree was taller than others and was at the edge of the forest grove. From it, he could survey the surrounding plains as well as the main road to Jiao Cheng. He was soon fast asleep.

An indefinite time later, he was awakened by the sound of horses and men. Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes and started in shock. Both the insides and outside of the jungle were filled with Wei soldiers. Even a conservative estimate numbered them at about a thousand. They were making a thorough search of the area. He was immediately covered in cold sweat, realising that

being overly exhausted, he was not aroused until the enemy was directly below him. In fact, if he had not been sleeping in a groove formed by three branches, he might have fallen to the ground in his stupor. He did not dare move even his fingers and toes [I think in English this translates to "did not move a hair"]. Only after the Wei soldiers had passed by did he dare to peek his head out to survey the situation.

Two teams of cavalry rode past on the official road outside the jungle grove. Further out, there was a hill with even more horses and men. The commanders of this search appeared to be there. Looking at the scale of the search, he knew that the Wei King whom he had formerly benefitted had spared no effort in his command to capture or kill Xiang Shaolong. This contingent of more than two thousand soldiers were likely from Jiao Cheng's garrison, and were likely only a portion of the entire search party. With such strength in numbers and the Wei people's home ground advantage, he realised he would be unable to advance even an inch.

He couldn't help feeling a tinge of regret. If he had not impatiently reached for Zhongmu but had detoured to Daliang instead, he would not be in his present danger. Right now, it seemed the safest option would be to return to the mountainous Wei-Han border. He could then hide there for ten days to half a month while the tempest died down. It would then be much easier to get to wherever he wanted to go.

At this moment, the sound of dogs barking rang out in the forest. Xiang Shaolong's tensed, awaiting his fate. At present, the large number of people present had muddled the scents so he was not afraid of being discovered by the hounds' acute noses. However, if he was escaping alone in the dead of

the night, it would be difficult for him to escape the hounds' attention. Seeing the enemy's troop disposition, how would he dare to continue towards Jiao Cheng? Once the patrolling soldiers had left, he would change his direction from North to East towards the South of Daliang.

Staking his all and after avoiding endless waves of pursuing soldiers, Xiang Shaolong finally arrived at the West bank of the famous river "Jia Lu He". Looking across, both sides were tranquil and undisturbed, nary a person in sight. But he was also certain that there were concealed sentries in the jungle overlooking the river. He scrutinised carefully, spotting a place where more than ten enemies could conceal themselves. He then ascended a tree and hid himself patiently, waiting for nightfall.

He quickly fell asleep from his exhaustion. When he awoke, the entire landscape had turned into beautiful white wonderland. His face and upper body were covered with light snow, but he did not feel cold. The first snowfall had finally arrived. Xiang Shaolong brushed off the powdery snow on his body and looked somberly at the continuing snowfall. Snow storms were good for concealing hiding places, but terrible for flight. If he jumped into the water now and emerged from the river wet, he would freeze to death. Moreover, once the snowfall stopped, the footprints he left behind would make it impossible for him to evade the pursuing enemies.

At the moment, he only had three choices:

The first was to chop wood and construct a raft to ford the great river. However this would be time consuming and prone to incidents and dangerous, unless he could be sure that the enemies' sentries were not

nearby. Else once he alerted the enemy, he would not even have the chance to defend himself.

The second option was to follow the bank upriver. From Jing Nian's map, the source of this river was a mountainous region Southwest of Zhongmu. Nonetheless, once he rounded the river, he would be near the Southern corner of Zhongmu, which would be extremely dangerous. Moreover, if he then wanted to carry on to Daliang, the route would be 500 miles longer than what he originally planned, totally not worth it.

The final option was to head downriver. Even though this would bring him further and further from Daliang, it would allow him to escape the danger zone relatively easily. If he could reach the peaceful areas where several large rivers converged, he could even look for an opportunity to cross the river on a boat. More, he could divert even further South to the Chu border. Then even if he was captured by the Chus, he might even be released by Li Yan Yan or Li Yuan privately on account of their former affections.

Once he made his decision, he hurriedly got on the move and followed the river South. He walked until daybreak before the snow finally stopped. When Xiang Shaolong turned his head to look, he saw his footprints like a long tail on the virgin snow and silently called out in misery. After he carried on a while more, he realised that if he carried on thus, he would be discovered by the pursuing soldiers sooner or later. With sudden inspiration, he stopped, inspected his surroundings, formulated a plan and hurried towards a nearby forest grove. Entering the forest, he drew Blood Wave and cut down a relatively slender pomegranate tree. He next used his dagger to pare the tree into two five feet long skis. The front foot of the skis were raised slightly. The

middle of the skis were also raised slightly, extending front and back, just enough for him to step on it with his booted feet. He next drilled four small holes in the wood, cut his hooks into two and used them to secure his boots to the skis through the holes. The most clever was the groove at the bottom of the skis from front to back, emulating modern skis.

At dusk, this first pair of skis in China was finally realised. As a Special Force soldier, Xiang Shaolong had received expert skiing training. Proceeding thus was as easy as ABC to him. After completing the skis, he also fashioned some ski poles. The top was wider and the bottom narrowed to a point. Three inches above the sharpened point, he lashed a horizontal stick, serving as "snow disks" [I think he's referring to the discs at the bottom of ski poles that prevent them from sinking in too deep. Huang Yi must be a fan of skiing to think of this detail =)].

When everything was complete, it was already late at night. Cutting and paring the hard as iron pomegranate tree had cost him a lot of energy, so he rested a while before making his next move. He hung the skis and ski poles on his back and ran to the riverbank on foot. Although it was difficult to make each step, his mood was greatly improved from before. By daybreak, he had covered about three miles, arriving at the banks of the great river. He deliberately climbed down the banks, leaving distinct footprints before doubling back by stepping into the footprints, climbing back up the bank. Next, he put on his skis, and secured them. He gave a shout and began his miraculous feat of skiing.

He utilised the undulating landscape, increasing his speed, unhurried but quick, rounded a large circle and returned to the forest grove. He then hid

himself on top of a taller than average tree and waited. His spirit was immeasurably stimulated, and required a long time before he was able to calm himself down and close his eyes to get some sleep.

Roused by noise, Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes to look, and was shocked out of his wits. The entire landscape was covered with Wei cavalry, at least a thousand strong. They were following his distinct footprints towards the forest grove. He saw them pass through the forest grove towards the riverbank, to where his footprints ended before suddenly halting to confer. Soon, the Wei soldiers dismounted and rapidly cut wood to build rafts, and endless hum of activity. At this moment, Snow started falling again, more heavily than the previous snowfall. Waves of snow clumps started falling from the ash grey sky, sometimes slowly, sometimes flurriedly. By midday, all hoofprints and footprints prior to the snowfall had been obscured.

Xiang Shaolong silently thanked the heavens for their assistance. This way, once the enemy had forded the river and failed to find his footprints, they could only spread out to comb the area, getting further and further away from him in their pursuit. Originally detrimental to him, the snowfall had become his protective charm. As he was celebrating in his heart, barking sounds started in the distance. A hundred plus strong contingent of Wei foot soldiers with hunting dogs was coming along the river.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realised that this team was part of the cavalry regiment that had constructed rafts and crossed the river. The cavalry had rushed ahead because they had seen his footprints and also because of the impending snowfall, hence the canine contingent had lagged behind by two hours. He couldn't help exclaiming at his close shave. If it had been the

canine contingent that had arrived first earlier, his brilliant plan might not have succeeded. But now, the heavy snowfall had covered his scent!

It was dusk before the entire Wei regiment crossed the river. Xiang Shaolong patiently waited for another two hours before climbing down the tree. Taking advantage of the dark night, high winds and snow-filled sky, he took up his ski poles, and like a bird over a boundless snowscape, he flew towards the Jia Lu river. With this apparatus to "fly over" the snowy landscape, he decided to risk a bit of danger and edged towards Zhongmu. From his first escape until now, this was the first time he felt any hope for the future.

## Chapter 4

### Illicit Relations in a Secret Room

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Xiang Shaolong lay in the underbrush observing the enemy's barracks. In just two days, he had covered what would have taken an ordinary person ten days, reaching a Zhao encampment approximately ten miles from Zhongmu. He was initially confident of sneaking past the enemy's defensive perimeter, but upon seeing the situation, this unfulfilled dream burst like foam bubbles in sunshine. Most aggravating was the fact that Li Mu had cut down all the trees in the area that might have offered him cover. He had also dug long trenches in the plains where Xiang Shaolong was and posted guards on all passageways. Even if he could somehow cross the trenches, he still had to surmount three layers of fences before he could reach the barracks. And then he had to sneak past ten miles of barracks and finally through a stretch of plains outside Zhongmu that was completely devoid of cover.

Looking at Li Mu's arrangements, he must be preventing anyone from approaching Zhongmu. Xiang Shaolong was like a delirious half-starved kitten seeing a fish but was unable to consume it. The agony was beyond description. His only gratification was that while Li Mu had put a water-tight seal around Zhongmu, he was still unable to breach Zhongmu's sturdy walls. He was most familiar with Zhongmu's capabilities. Defending Zhongmu for even a year would not be a difficult thing.

At the moment, he had only two choices. The first was to follow his original plan to get to Daliang and then to the Zhao border before reuniting with

Huan Qi at Tunliu. The other option was to go round Zhongmu, sneak past the Zhao soldier's frontier defence and then back to Qin. The latter option was of course much more dangerous. With Li Mu's meticulous planning, he is sure to have outposts preventing Qin soldiers from rendering assistance from the East. If he did not have his skis, this option was akin to walking into a trap. But at this point, it was not without a chance of success. Just as this desire was burning in his heart, the sound of horses and dogs came from the Southwest. Xiang Shaolong's heart sank. He let go of this enticing thought and headed towards Daliang.

He reached the outskirts of the Wei capital of Daliang at dusk the next day. Having returned to the scene of his previous exploits, he thought about the late Prince Xinling Wei Wuji and could not help his conflicting emotions. At this point he had already exhausted his dried rations and was both hungry and tired. Yet Daliang's defences had obviously been strengthened. All the high points were staffed with sentries. Most despairing for him were the few large rivers and man-made ditches obstructing the road towards Daliang.

Observing the area, he realised that he had to cross the rivers to reach Daliang before crossing the ditches on the other side of capital in order to get to the Zhao border. It would also be best for him to stock up on foodstuff on the way as the bitter cold made it impossible to gather wild fruits to allay his hunger as he had been doing. At present, his greatest advantage was that the Wei people were still unaware that he had arrived at the vicinity of Daliang. It was therefore not impossible to traverse Daliang before rushing to the Zhao border.

After the decision was made, he hid his equipment such as the ski board and

crossbow at a certain place and marked a symbol. Then he climbed up onto a big tree, swept away the snow and huddled in between the branches to wait for dawn.

At midnight, snow fell heavily and he felt frozen and trembled in the cold. Despite suffering from cold and hunger, the only thing he could do was to be patient. As he was being attacked, he was always escaping capture using his wits and strong determination and therefore had no time to think. However, as he settled down, he was plagued by stray thoughts.

Thoughts about the man who was sent by Jing Nian and whether this man managed to reach Teng Yi with his news. Thoughts about those wives in Xianyang, what how they would react to his news. These thoughts felt like tonnes of pressure on his mind, and he was unable to relax.

The painful borne by the body is far less than the pressure felt in the heart.

Suddenly he felt the chill and lost consciousness. When he woke, he felt the pain throughout his entire body and realised that he had fallen off the tree in the night, and his body was covered by snow. The winter sun had risen and the soft sunlight entered the forest. He tried to get up and felt the heat on his face and a weakened mental state. He realised that he had fallen sick at this critical moment! Xiang Shaolong felt extremely weak both mentally and physically, but he knew that if he didn't continue the journey before nightfall, he would not live to see tomorrow's dawn.

By thinking about his wives to distract the weakness, he tried his hardest to stand. Every step that he stumbled, he would get back up to try to reach the

edge of forest. When he barely got to edge, his strength gave out and he fell back down unconscious.

After a long period, he was woken by the sound of cart wheels scraping against the ground. He opened his eyes and saw a convoy of carts moving along the road to Daliang. Sunlight had already faded and dark clouds gathered overhead to signal another incoming snowstorm.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this very moment would be about life or death. Trying to avoid attention, he snuck into the convoy and climbed onto one of the carts, falling onto soft wheat.

Then he lost consciousness.

A voice woke Xiang Shaolong. Although he still suffered from hot and cold, tiredness, and a leaden head. He still felt better than before. But his throat burnt and he desperately needed some water or tea.

Xiang Shaolong lifted up the tent of the cart. The only thing he saw in the endless white snow, besides the road, were some houses. It felt like he had arrived in the city of Daliang after a nightmare.

The cart moved slowly and headed off in another direction. At that moment, Xiang Shaolong could not decide whether it was better alight here or not, and as he hesitated, the cart turned into a street and entered into the yard of a residence.

Xiang Shaolong gathered his remaining strength and willpower and waited

for the right moment. The cart stopped in front of a warehouse. Sunlight had been extinguished, and thus the workers were not going to offload the cart immediately. Instead, they just parked the cart and left.

Xiang Shaolong thanked his lucky stars. After for a while, he used his remaining strength to crawl out from the cart, and fell onto the show.

Lying on the ground, he refreshed his mind to observe the circumstances. He saw that the warehouses were dark but that the front lawn was lighted. He observed that the residence should belong to one of the Wei's nobles as it was surrounded by high walls.

He laid in a rectangular open lawn and there was nothing other than the carts. On side of the lawn was a stable while the other side consisted of the slave quarters.

The sound of dogs barking from somewhere in the front lawn startled Xiang Shaolong. In this era, noble residences always rear dogs so that when the noble is sleeping, the dogs would patrol the lawn.

There is no way for Xiang Shaolong to climb out from the wall in his current condition and the only thing he can do is to find a hiding place and wait for tomorrow.

With strength that appeared from nowhere, he got up and to find a warehouse to lay in. At the same time he feels that he is recovering, and his spirit is restored.

When he got in front of a warehouse, he found that it is locked up securely and that he can't enter.

On impulse, he checked every door and manages to find an unlocked door at the last try. He feels joy and enters.

As the door closes and shuts out the light from the front lawn, a hot body hugs him suddenly. She says, "I did not expect you to come. Didn't Mistress command you to drive a cart for her? Why are you back this early?"

Xiang Shaolong grumbled inwardly. He had inadvertently bumped into an illicit relation between slaves. He was out of words to explain but the infatuated lady encircled her arms around his neck and kissed him softly.

It would be disrespectful to decline so Xiang Shaolong took it in his stride.

The lady left his lips trembling and said, "You are not Shǐlíng. You are Liú Jié. You can't cheat me."

Xiang Shaolong replied vaguely afraid that she would raise her voice. He moved forward and hugged the lady and kissed her cherry lips.

The lady's alluring passion, her moral struggle, and amorousness created a reaction within him. Perhaps it was the excitement of sexual desire that caused Xiang Shaolong to feel better from his illness, for he did not feel the cold unlike previously.

The most exciting thing he feels that the seductive event is that he does not

even know the appearance of the other party; from touch he can feel that she is voluptuous, and sexually experienced.

Xiang Shaolong strength is in his resistance against temptation of womanly wiles. But he is not a modest in rites. Now that he is turned on by desire, he is unable to stop. Moreover, if he does not satisfy her, he has to subdue or kill her. Upon weighing the importance of the 2 decisions, the former is better and it may deceive. [Someone help me improve this passage please]

His hands are searching on her body to incite sexual passion. The lady starts breathing heavily and her body becomes soft and hot. If there is a light, it would reveal her burning cheeks. His searching fingers finds that her coat is surprisingly thick and her smooth thighs are plentiful. He realizes that she is a very young and estimates her age not older than 20.

Her reaction is like burning fire while her body reacts to his hugs and fondles, and she can't stop groping his back. A groan is released from deep inside her lips and anyone knows what she desires for.

The fact that she knows that he is not the one who is waiting for but is still reacting freely, therefore her mind is expansive on sexual relationship. Thus Xiang Shaolong does not feel any responsibility.

This thought causes him to relax and enjoy the sexual amorousness.

Suddenly, she detaches from him and leads him by the hand into darkness. Without the heat from her burning body, he is feeling cold and weak again. He forced a smile, never expecting that a lady can be a panacea to his illness.

They stop and fall onto some wheat. There is a quilt on the wheat, since she was sneaking here more than once, she was well prepared.

Laying on a comfortable “bed”, Xiang Shaolong never wants to get up again.

The lady stands up and takes off her clothes like a sex-starved person. She throws herself on Xiang Shaolong with a smooth, warm and hot body. When she starts to strip him, Xiang Shaolong finds that he is reacting passionately.

Xiang Shaolong smiles bitterly, he is poor but still addicted to sex.

“You such are despicable person, usually looking at me with your desire.” The lady whispers on his ear. “I don’t know what you paid ShiLing for this that he lets you come and humiliate me. Hurry up!”

Xiang Shaolong turns and presses tightly to her. The lady says “Do you like me?” He mumbles, and concentrates on the joy of sexual relationship.

Debauchery descends onto the warehouse.

Xiang Shaolong worked hard for a while, his strength could not cater for this, so the lady takes the lead. After a while, she is spent and lays on his body. Xiang Shaolong hugs her tightly and says “I am not Liu Jie!”

She trembles. “Who are you?”

He has a planned answer. “I am Chen Wu, a worker that followed from the

cart team. I want to see the situation of the warehouse but I met you. Thank God, I am so lucky. What is your name?"

The lady hesitated, and then she laughs out loud and says, "You dead man! Treated me like this! I am Qiu Lin and I am the maid of Young Master. Sigh! You! But you are better than Young Master and Shi Ling and even Liu Jie is not as good as you."

Xiang Shaolong feels free for this and asks, "Would you please bring me some food and drink? But don't let anyone know!"

Qiu Lin sits up and whispers with her hand lingering on his chest, "OK! If someone knows this, I am dead too!" And she dresses up and leaves.

Xiang Shaolong wears his clothes and falls sleep because of the exertion.

After a while, he is woken by Qiu Lin. She lights on a oil lamp, looking at him speechless. Xiang Shaolong sits up, and looking on her too.

Qiu Lin's beauty cannot compare his wives, but she is still good-looking. The most attractive thing is that she has a dainty, cute, delicate and attractive body. That is why Shi Ling is addicted to her. This girl is bewitching in all aspects.

Qiu Lin fondles on his bearded cheek and whispers, "I've never seen such a dominant and handsome guy like you! You are just a little bit thin."

Xiang Shaolong hugged her and said, "What sort of good food have you

brought?"

Qiu Lin opened up the bundle, took out a pot of tea and a dozen steamed buns.

Xiang Shaolong watched with dripping saliva and devoured them right away. Qiu Lin asked, "What are the hooks on your belt used for?"

Xiang Shaolong made something up, "It is used for moving goods."

Qiu Lin, who clearly wasn't one that would think deeply into things, did not doubt him and asked, "Wouldn't Boss Xie, who was in charge of transporting the grain, blame you for slipping away like this?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "I told him I was looking for friends, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Qiu Lin jested lewdly, "Looking for friends? More like looking for girls, and I just happened to be the girl."

Watching her flirted shamelessly with him, Xiang Shaolong in a flush of hot blood and almost wanted to pull her over and have another roll in the hay. At the same time, he also rejoiced in his heart. Who could have expected that his earlier activity had caused him to break out in a sweat and resulted in his physical condition taking a turn for the better?

Qiu Lin cast a glance at Xiang Shaolong and showed a hint of resentment, "In the future, I would cast aside name and status, and only wish to be with

you!"

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "You wouldn't be able to help yourself even if you wished otherwise." By asking seemingly casual questions, Xiang Shaolong skilfully extracted information from her on his surroundings. He found that the mansion belonged to a minister of the Wei and the state of affairs in the household.

Qiu Lin sighed, "Young Master is coming back, I have to leave you ....."

Xiang Shaolong brought her in his embrace and softly said, "When can you return?"

Qiu Lin was in a confused state of emotion, "It depends on the situation, how can I tell?"

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong said, "For Sister Qiu Lin, there is nothing that I, Chen Wu would not do. If there are no mishaps, I'll just wait for you here. Sister Qiu will come here when she can, but it is important to bring some food and drink. If possible, some clothes too."

Qiu Lin was in a fit of passion and paid no mind to anything else; she rained kisses on his face, constantly nodding.

Xiang Shaolong was still afraid she would ask others of him, and after reminding her not to do so, let her leave. Using the lighting from this temporary comfort zone, Xiang Shaolong shifted to a concealed corner of the warehouse, laid down and rested. The warehouse was full of firewood, which

was an indispensable necessity in the winter.

For a time, he could take a breather. Not only he had a girl for company, he was also in no danger of being captured by Wei's troops. He only needed to build up his health before leaving in the night by using hook and rope to climb over the wall.

However, there are limits to one's physical endurance. If he was to travel in this freezing cold weather, he could at most last a few days. As Zhao is to the north of Wei, the weather there would be even more severe. Previously when he was anxious to return Zhongmu, he made the wrong decision to turn north instead of south. If he had gone south, he would have reached Chu and would not be trapped in this situation where he could neither advance or retreat. It was indeed an unwise decision. With those thoughts on his mind, he soon fell asleep.

On the second day, although there were people coming in to take out bundles of firewood, they had no clue to his presence.

Before dusk, Qiu Lin brought some food, and said apologetically, "Wu Lang (young man or husband), please make do with it! Young Master's clothes don't fit you too well; there are not many men as tall as you."

Xiang Shaolong, however was totally satisfied, after sharing a moment of tenderness, let her go. Physically, he had more or less recovered and was silently thinking that this wasn't a suitable place to stay for too long.

Before the vicious dogs were set loose, he climbed over the wall onto the

street. With the howling snow, there were not many people. The few people on the streets were also hurrying along and paying little attention. Xiang Shaolong used a piece of rag torn off the thin quilt to cover his head and face and headed toward the north gate.

When walls were in sight, he was however shocked to discover that the walls were covered with thick ice and extremely slippery. It would be impossible to climb over even in the best possible conditions. Xiang Shaolong was, however unwilling to give up immediately. He found a suitable length of wall, and tried a dozen times but failed to set the hook over the wall. At this point, he had no choice but to admit defeat, while gaining an understanding why there were so few sieges in the winter.

By this time, returning to the warehouse would be a problem due to the roaming dogs. Therefore he had no choice but to find a side lane and huddled up for the night before making his way cautiously towards the gates at dawn. The snow stopped at midnight and the sun rose from the horizon at dawn. Xiang Shaolong was walking down the street, with the feeling of being totally naked. He had always been proud of the body, but now it was his biggest burden. He had specifically chosen the side streets to avoid eyes and ears, where he came to an open space where a group of children was playing with the shuttlecock.

One of the children caught sight of him, and his face changed colour, and shouted, "Here's the bandit!!"

The other children saw him and scattered off in fear. Xiang Shaolong sighed bitterly in his heart, "Do I look like a bandit?" Suddenly, he understood where his problem lied.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Held Back In Reserve**

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Xiang Shaolong could no longer worry about exposing his identity and hurried towards the north gate.

If his guess was not off, the reason why those kids would call him a “bandit” was that they had seen his wanted poster somewhere and recognised his face.

Now that he was known as a public enemy in Wei and if those kids that had seen him went home and told their parents. The alarm would be raised in the whole of Daliang in no time at all.

So if he missed the opportunity to escape now, he wouldn’t be able to do so at some later time even if he had grown wings.

At this junction, he no longer had the time to blame his own negligence. Fortunately, dark clouds started to form and cover the sun. As the gate grew in sight, snowflakes were dancing in the sky, providing him with a little cover.

When he reached a position where he could clearly observe the gate, he hid behind a big tree by the roadside, waiting for an opportunity to break out of the city.

The gate was staffed by around thirty guards who inspected both people and

carts going in and out of the city in a routine manner and did not seem to be particularly cautious or strict.

Xiang Shaolong was relieved and looked for an opportunity. If he managed to chance upon the sort of mule team that he entered the city in with, he would easily get away.

Despite waiting for nearly an hour, there were no carts traveling out of the city, even traders were scarce. During this freezing cold season, it was certainly not suitable to go on a journey and the absence of travellers was to be expected.

Around this time, the sound of hurried hooves could be heard and a large group of over 100 Wei cavalry came galloping at full speed towards the gate and swiftly dismounted. They seem to be preparing themselves to face a fierce and imminent enemy.

In the midst of the wind and snow, Xiang Shaolong faintly heard someone mentioning his name.

His heart sank.

The scenario that he hoped to avoid most had just happened.

The Weis knew he was in the city before he could get away.

The snow was getting heavier and heavier.

After he bought some small tools from a blacksmith shop, Xiang Shaolong snuck back into the warehouse and hid himself. He inserted a small but extremely sharp saw plus two fine iron rods into his hollowed-out soles and glued back the bottom layer. Unless his soles were stripped off, otherwise no one would expect anything unusual. At this moment, he did not know exactly how these would be put into use, so they were just preventive measures.

After some time, Qiu Lin came back again.

Xiang Shaolong remained in hiding, hardening his heart to ignore her call.

After Qiu Lin left disappointedly, he waited patiently till dusk before leaving the warehouse and returning to snow-filled streets.

The Wei troops were constantly patrolling the streets, check points were again setup at road junctions to question passerbys.

Xiang Shaolong knew that the Weis had embarked on a rigorous and thorough search, so he used the rope hook to mount over house by house. Only with great difficulty did he reach the Wei imperial district.

Thinking of the fact that the locust tree is still around but the people are no more, he can't help but felt dejected.

He wondered if Lady Ping Yuan is well and safe when he was suddenly startled out of his reminiscing by the sound of galloping horses.

Xiang Shaolong quickly steadied his mood, and under the cover of darkness,

moved toward the living area of the ministers in the palace.

Because all the residents here were rich and respectable, no soldiers come to patrol and search.

Xiang Shaolong, using his the special task force skills, ran in a zigzag manner, suddenly stopping and running, alternating between slow and fast.

At last, he stopped in front of a magnificent mansion house.

This inscription above the door read 'Lord Long Yang's Residence'.

After letting out a deep sigh, Xiang Shaolong followed the wall towards the direction of the building.

Arriving at the inner courtyard, he slipped on top of the wall. Only after confirming that there were no guard dogs on the prowl did he land on the ground.

He was in no hurry to find Lord Longyang. After inspecting the surroundings, he selected a large tree and shot out his grappling hook, pulling himself on top of the building.

Only after stabilizing his footing did he place Bloodwave, his dagger, and his other tools in a branched crook of the tree.

Returning to the ground, he snuck past several buildings at a go before arriving at the garden at the innermost residence.

Due to the blizzard, everyone in the residence had secreted themselves inside the building, making it extremely convenient for him to move about.

Passing by the garden, he trod upon a stone path, crossed a stone bridge, and arrived in front of a tall building.

Seeing that the building was three stories high and was located directly in the middle of the inner courtyard, he knew that he had arrived at Lord Longyang's residence.

By now, night had fallen. But lamplight shone out from the windows of the three-storied building, and an indistinct voice could be faintly heard as well.

Xiang Shaolong stealthily stepped on top of one of the windows and quietly looked inside the building.

Inside was a large hall. Two servant boys were seated at either side of the doorway, yawning widely.

Seeing this, he knew that Lord Longyang had yet to return. That was why those two poor boys had to force their eyelids open as they tiredly awaited their master's return.

Lord Longyang naturally must have heard the news that Xiang Shaolong had arrived in Daliang. Perhaps at this very moment, he was in the palace discussing this matter with He Liangping.

Xiang Shaolong thought quietly for a period of time, then firmly made up his mind. Climbing back outside, he climbed to the highest level of the residence, then pushed the window open and entered the room. He had entered what he believed to be the private bedroom of Lord Longyang.

The way the room was decorated was very feminine. A slender, sloping recliner bed could be seen. It was covered in perfume, filling the room with the sweet scent of spring.

Under the light of the lamp affixed to the nearest window, the room appeared graceful and elegant. One shelf was filled with all sorts of little curios and toys, but only a single precious sword had been hung on the wall, demonstrating the martial energy of the room's master.

Xiang Shaolong, paying no mind to proprieties, laid down on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

After some period of time, the sound of footsteps startled him into wakefulness.

Xiang Shaolong immediately sat up, his rapt gaze instantly focusing on the slowly opening door.

Lord Longyang walked into the room, his feet moving slowly, as though encumbered by a thousand-pound heavy pair of shackles. "You two, go to bed!"

The two servants acknowledged the order and left.

Lord Longyang mournfully walked in, letting out a sad sigh.

Xiang Shaolong whispered, “High Lord!”

Lord Longyang’s ‘elegant form’ trembled as he turned to stare, astonished, into his bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong pushed aside the veil covering the bed. With a low laugh, he said, “High Lord, how have you been?”

Lord Longyang’s face ‘bloomed like a flower’, “Shaolong! You really came!”

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly made a shushing gesture with his hands. In a quiet voice, he said, “Don’t startle anyone here.”

Only now did Lord Longyang come to his senses. Distressed, he said, “Shaolong, why did you come to Daliang, much less reveal your presence? Now the King has ordered a regiment of twenty thousand crack troops to enter the city and search for your whereabouts.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled. “Your King seems to have forgotten that he is King, and also wed his beloved Empress, thanks solely to the efforts of I, Xiang Shaolong!”

An incomparably complex look flashed by Lord Longyang’s ‘elegant eyes’. Forcing out a laugh, he said, “In order to protect and preserve all that he now possesses, the King would be willing to sacrifice his own parents, much less

you.”

Letting out another sigh, he said, “Shaolong, you are too formidable! You defeated us so often that we are now afraid of you. Now, all of the Six Kingdoms know that so long as Xiang Shaolong exists, it will be very difficult for us to protect our countries. Under the spectre of our countries being ruined and our families perishing, what would you do, Shaolong, if you were in our positions?”

Xiang Shaolong looked deeply into his eyes. Calmly, he asked, “And what about you, Lord Longyang?”

Lord Longyang trembled slightly. His head lowering, he said, “Even if I risk my life, I shall treat Shaolong as I always have.”

Xiang Shaolong said, “High Lord, you have not disappointed me! It can be said that right now, in Daliang, I am friendless and without allies. Only you, High Lord, have the power to secretly, mysteriously deliver me from this city.”

Lord Longyang said, “Where do you want to go?”

Xiang Shaolong was silent for a long moment then replied, “I want to go to the Kingdom of Zhao. I am much more familiar with that region, and it’s much easier to return to Qin from there. Hah! Do you have anything to eat or drink, by the way?”

Lord Longyang said, “That’s not a problem. I’ll order my servants to prepare

some food. I'll just say that I'm hungry."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Don't startle anyone. Some water and some pastries will be enough."

Lord Longyang said, "Can it be that you don't even trust me anymore?"

Xiang Shaolong apologetically said, "That's not what I meant. But it's always best to be careful. Is there anyone else here?"

Lord Longyang replied, "Only two serving boys. They should be asleep on the second floor. Wait here a while. I'll go downstairs to pick up some pastries for you." Pushing the door open, he left.

Xiang Shaolong saw that as he left the room, his hands trembled slightly. In his heart, Xiang Shaolong sighed. He knew that he had probably made a mistake by coming here tonight.

Without the assistance of Lord Longyang, he couldn't come up with any other ideas as to how he could leave Daliang.

And now, he had to worry about Lord Longyang dispatching people to apprehend him. Fortunately, he had already prepared for this eventuality and had prepared an escape path.

His heart aching, he pushed the window open and once more clambered down. When he arrived at the bottom floor, Lord Longyang also had just arrived at the lowest floor.

Sneaking a peek into the window, he saw Lord Longyang, tears silently streaming down his face, retrieve a bottle from some hidden location and scatter some sort of powder from inside the bottle onto the tea kettle.

Seeing the actions of this 'friend' of his, Xiang Shaolong's hands and feet grew cold. He deeply regretted this visit.

But he didn't have any other choices, aside from seeking out Lord Longyang. And even now, in his heart, he didn't feel the slightest bit of reproach towards Lord Longyang for betraying him.

After seeing this, Xiang Shaolong returned to Lord Longyang's bedroom on the third floor, pretending to have been sitting there quietly the entire time, waiting for Lord Longyang's return.

Having wiped his tears dry, Lord Longyang entered, holding the tray of delicacies and the tea kettle which he had scattered the powder into.

As the two sat down, Xiang Shaolong ravenously wolfed down all of the food, then suddenly pretended to have heard something. In a low voice, he said, "I think someone is coming!"

Frowning, Lord Longyang said, "How could anyone be coming?"

Xiang Shaolong said, "Just now, I thought I heard someone outside. Go take a look and see if I was mistaken."

Lord Longyang didn't suspect a thing. Rising, he strode towards the window and looked outside.

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to grab the kettle of tea and poured all of it out onto the floor near his feet, then put it back.

Lord Longyang looked in all directions but naturally saw nothing at all. Returning to the table, he sat down and said, "There's no one there."

Xiang Shaolong sighed. "Nowadays I'm filled with suspicion. Even when I hear the wind blow and the grass sway, it feels as though I am being pursued by soldiers." After speaking, he grabbed the kettle of tea and pretended to drink it all in one go.

A look of utter sadness appeared in Lord Longyang's eyes, and he didn't speak.

Xiang Shaolong patted himself on the stomach. "What's the situation with Li Mu's counterattack on Zhongmou?"

Lord Longyang laughed bitterly. "You should know better than me. Aside from you, who can take down Zhongmou in a single strike as though it were naught but flipping one's hand around? I also heard that, in his attempt to capture you, Li Mu also suffered the loss of a regiment of men. For now, with it snowing so heavily, it'll be difficult for the Qin reinforcements to come. Once the spring comes and the flowers bloom, the Qin reinforcements will come and Li Mu will be forced to retreat."

Xiang Shaolong felt relieved. Rubbing his forehead, he said with 'surprise', "I don't know if it's because I've been too exhausted, but I'm starting to feel woozy and sleepy."

In a low voice, Lord Longyang said, "Then go to sleep for a while! In the morning, I'll come up with something to send you out of the city."

Xiang Shaolong, acting as though walking was very difficult for him, allowed himself to be escorted by Lord Longyang to the pallet.

Yawning twice, he pretended to have passed away.

After Lord Longyang called his name twice, he leaned over Xiang Shaolong's body and wept bitterly for a while. Sighing, he said, "Shaolong, please don't blame me. For the sake of Great Wei, I have no choice but to do what I do."

After Lord Longyang opened the door and left, Xiang Shaolong sprang to his feet and quickly departed.

When he scaled down the wall and landed on the ground, Xiang Shaolong felt an incomparable sense of loneliness and solitude.

Right now, the best place to hide would be, without a doubt, the royal palace. Because the palace was large, well-populated yet strictly restricted, nobody would dare to mount a search inside.

But because the royal palace was surrounded by particularly tall walls and backed by a river, he could only gaze upon it but not enter.

When he thought about the palace, his heart was moved as he suddenly remembered those passageways located underneath the former residence of Prince Xinling, with which he was so familiar.

Although Lord Wuji of Wei had been forcibly pulled into the grave by King Anli as a funeral companion, his mansion remained. If it had a new master, that would be even better. Perhaps the new owner of the mansion didn't know anything about the tunnels underneath.

How could he dare delay? Seizing the opportunity afforded to him by the still-falling snow, he raced towards the not-too-distant manor of Lord Xinling.

If he were Lord Longyang, upon finding himself missing, he definitely wouldn't raise too big of a fuss openly. All he would do would be to hoarsely swallow the entire story and keep it hidden within his belly. Otherwise, the King of Wei might criticize and penalize him for dereliction of duty in letting Xiang Shaolong escape.

Within an hour, he had arrived at the secret forest located at the north wall of Prince Xinling's mansion and had found that secret tunnel entryway.

He remembered how, in the past, he had carried the beautiful Third Princess Zhao Qian out of this tunnel in their escape. When he thought of her gentle disposition, totally free from the filthy aura that pervaded the court of the Zhao kingdom, a hundred different feelings swelled up in his breast.

Sick at heart and downcast, he felt for the edges of the steel board covering

the tunnel and experimentally gave it a tug.

The steel board lifted in his hands.

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but stay there, transfixed.

He had just thought of the tunnels and decided to give it a try. He hadn't expected to really be able to pull the steel covering off with a tug.

All tunnels are designed with the intention of being used as an escape route in times of peril. This is why they are all designed to be opened from within, and not from without. What the current state of the exit showed was that someone had fled from this tunnel, but no one had relocked it from the other side. From this, one could deduce that the mansion most likely had a new master now, one who didn't know of the existence of these tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of exultation. Entering the tunnel, he closed the opening.

From his pocket, he withdrew a flint and struck it to make sparks of flame.

Underneath the flickering light of the flames, the tunnel seemed to stretch off infinitely into the distance.

Remembering how the tunnels were linked together with the copper listening tubes in Lord Xinling's bedroom, Xiang Shaolong walked quietly and slowly on tiptoes in the opposite direction.

This time, he was particularly careful. He noticed that aside from the tunnel leading to the residence where Lord Shaoyuan stayed, there were three other exits as well, naturally going to different residences within the manor. After walking for about a hundred feet, he suddenly had a premonition and looked down.

Two pieces of yellow gold glittered, reflecting the light from his torch.

Xiang Shaolong reached down and plucked them up, placing them in his hands. He suddenly understood.

Previously, when Prince Xinling had been given the poison wine to drink, he knew that it would be hard for him to avoid this disaster. Thus he had given the order for his beloved concubines and relatives to take his valuables and treasures and flee for their lives via these tunnels, and they did so, slipping out by the hidden forest next to the stone wall.

One could imagine how, in the terror of the moment, as everyone was fleeing for their lives, nobody would even notice if they dropped two pieces of gold.

Right now, Xiang Shaolong was in dire need of money. With these two pieces of gold, his situation naturally had changed drastically. At the very least, he could easily buy a horse to ride.

Placing the gold within his pouch, he continued to move forward until he finally arrived at the wide-open door of what appeared to be a treasury.

Inside was a scene of utter chaos. Not a single bit of gold or jewelry was left behind. Only things such as jade horse carvings, ceremonial cauldrons, and precious weapons remained, enough that in the twenty first century, the collection would be considered a first class collection of antiques.

The four walls of the room all had lamps affixed to them, and there was even a big vase of lamp oil hanging in one corner. Xiang Shaolong felt joy in his heart. Blowing out the flame, he sat down, leaning against a wall, the room now so dark that he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him.

He was, at least for now, in a totally safe spot.

But how would he be able to escape from the capital city of the country of Wei? There were more than two severe months of winter remaining. Would he have to hide in this lightless, sunless hole for more than two months? If he had to go out every day to forage for food, then as the saying goes, 'the more one goes up the often, the more likely one would run into a tiger'. Sooner or later, he would be caught.

But for the moment, he had no free time to think about these troublesome problems.

Only in his dreams, now, could he reunite in song and with drink with his beloved wives and son.

For their sake, he would definitely persevere to the end. He would make sure that he would survive to meet with them again.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Hard To Move A Single Step**

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When Xiang Shaolong opened his eyes, all he could see nothing but utter darkness. Although he was unable to differentiate between night and day, his head still felt dizzy and he wanted to continue to sleep.

He had been startled awake by the sound of someone speaking. At first, he felt shock, thinking that someone had discovered him. Then, he saw that the tunnel remained unchanged, with the sound coming from one corner of the secret room. Only then did he understand that the voice was coming from one of the copper tubes.

Since the copper hearing tube could be used to overhear what was being said in the secret room, of course it could be used to overhear what was being said in the room above.

Xiang Shaolong took out one of his few remaining matches, struck it, and lit one of the lamps. The copper tube suddenly appeared in front of him.

It was located next to the entrance, glimmering under the light.

Xiang Shaolong roused his spirit and carefully snuck towards the hearing tube, then pressed his ear against it.

He heard a male voice laugh lecherously, "Your body has become more and

more voluptuous. No wonder his royal highness was so enraptured with you the other day.”

An unwilling female voice replied, “High Lord, if you were to decide to give me to his highness, I would rather go ahead and commit suicide.”

Xiang Shaolong inwardly praised this woman, who deeply understood how men felt. Even though she knew and accepted the fact that she was to be gifted to someone else, she still put on an act of being unwilling to acquiesce.

Indeed, the sound of a gentle, lingering kiss could be heard from upstairs.

The female coquettishly said, “High Lord, didn’t you have a banquet that you needed to attend? Yet you insist on teasing me right now instead.”

As he listened, Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a great sense of shock.

If this was time for a dinner banquet, he must have slept for half a night followed by a full day. He must have slept for at least twenty or so hours. How could he still be so sleepy? For a time, he forgot to eavesdrop on the two above as he pondered this.

He came to the sudden realization that although the tunnel had openings, there still wasn’t much airflow. If he hadn’t been startled awake, it was very possible that he would have died of asphyxiation in his dreams.

He suddenly heard three words, ‘Xiang Shao Long’ enter his ears. He hurriedly began to listen again. That high lord said, “The city is in a total state

of uproar right now. All banquets, large or small, have been cancelled thanks to that Xiang Shaolong. His highness has ordered that any residence found to be harboring Xiang Shaolong without reporting him will suffer the penalty of having their entire family line exterminated. Hah, there's no corpse worth more money than that of Xiang Shaolong's. The head by itself is worth five hundred taels of gold. Everyone has exhausted themselves searching for this fellow."

The woman said, "In my humble opinion, he must have left the city long ago. Otherwise, how could it be possible that with all of Daliang in such an uproar and searching for him, neither hide nor hair of him can be found?"

Sighing, she added, "This person is so formidable. He comes as he pleases and goes as he wishes. Nobody can stop him."

That high lord sighed along with her. "It was easy enough for him to slip away, but he's caused Lord Fan to be exhausted on his account. Since today he was unable to capture Xiang Shaolong, as the city watch commander, all of the responsibility is now coming crashing down on his head. Just now he came to beg for my help to ask his highness for forgiveness. But right now, the King is filled with rage. I'm not so stupid as to draw trouble to myself."

He added, "Xiang Shaolong really came at the most inopportune time. He wore me out and forced me to miss Feng Fei's exquisite performance. I hear that tomorrow she will be going to the country of Qi. Who knows when she will be back? Tomorrow I simply must go send her off."

Only then did Xiang Shaolong learn that the head of the Three Famous

Courtesans, Feng Fei, was currently in the city of Daliang. His heart was moved, and he had no desire to listen any further. Leaving the treasury room, he snuck out of the tunnel and hid himself near the grove outside of it, so as to breathe some fresh air.

It really was around the sunset time outside. Even a few specks of snow could be seen drifting down.

Right now, the only safe place for him was this tunnel. But if he were to be found again, it would be impossible for him to escape.

Lord Longyang clearly had yet to divulge the fact that they had met, as if he had, that high lord from just then would have mentioned it. But even though this was the case, this wasn't of much help to him.

He thought of Feng Fei again.

This beautiful woman with a unique aura. If she were willing to help, maybe she could bring him out of the city.

But they had only met once and their relationship was very shallow. Would she risk her own life to save him? What was even more headache-inducing was the fact that he didn't even know where she lived.

Even if he knew, to sneak into her room would be a trivial matter. As he continued to think, his heart grew numb. Just at this moment, the sound of a dog baying came from the inner courtyard.

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. He hurriedly dived into the tunnel again. Based on his memory of the above-ground structures, he rushed out of an exit and arrived at a garden within a courtyard house.

Lights were seen coming from the front of the courtyard house only. The other parts of the house were all dark and unlit.

Xiang Shaolong guessed that the vicious dog was still leashed within the inner courtyard and had yet to be released. Relieved, he moved about freely.

Using his grappling hooks and his nimble hands, at a single go he traversed multiple houses. Dodging several servants, he first snuck into the kitchen and procured sufficient provisions for himself along with a kettle of hot tea before sneaking back into the tunnel. After filling his stomach, his fighting spirit became vigorous again.

Neither the tunnel nor Daliang itself was a place that he could stay for long.

But he still had yet to come up with a method to leave the city safely.

When all of the servants and scouts had finished searching the entire city without any success, they would surely guess that he had hidden himself in some secret location.

There was no lack of intelligent men in the nation of Wei. Lord Longyang himself was an extremely perceptive person. Sooner or later, he would think of the secret passages and the listening tubes that passed by the former Lord Xinling's manor and would also come to the conclusion that there might be

still-undiscovered passageways in the tunnels. If he were to only occasionally pop out to steal some food or snacks, it shouldn't be a problem, but in the long run, suspicions would still be raised.

After thinking of these two problems, he made up his mind that within two days, he must leave the city. Else, he could forget about leaving ever again.

After making sure that the bedroom above the treasury was empty, he snuck up, opened a chest, and took out a set of winter garments and cloak. Just as he was preparing to leave, the sound of footsteps could be heard coming from outside the room, followed the sound of someone sitting down and faintly laughing.

Xiang Shaolong's heart was moved, and he edged closer to the door. Pulling it slightly open, he snuck a peek outside.

He was absolutely shocked at what he saw.

Three people were seated outside, followed by nearly ten close confidantes. Everyone's face showed signs of worry.

One of them was actually Lord Longyang.

His face was ashen pale, and he seemed to have suddenly aged many years. He looked wane and pallid, and no longer seemed like the 'liquid, gentle beauty' of before.

Of the other two, one was an army general in military regalia, while the other

was middle-aged man in a minister's garbs.

The general was the first to speak. "We came to speak with you, Lord Pingqu, regarding our efforts to locate Xiang Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong's heart grew cold. He knew that Lord Longyang must have already deduced that he was hiding here.

Surprised, that Lord Pingqu said, "General Fan, how has your search for Xiang Shaolong ended up here in my residence?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Xiang Shaolong recognized him as the man who was taking liberties with his concubine the other day.

The reason that they were speaking in the inner rooms rather than in the main room showed that they were afraid of the news leaking out.

That showed that they had already concluded that he was hiding here.

He suspected that this General Fan, the commander of the city watch of Dalian, had already ordered men to surround the entirety of Lord Xinling's manor.

But he still wasn't concerned, because the exit near the hidden grove was far from Lord Xinling's manor and would definitely not be easy to discover.

Lord Longyang sighed. "General Fan is willing to use his own head as the guarantee that Xiang Shaolong has yet to leave the city. If he is still hiding in

the city, the most likely hiding place would be here.”

Xiang Shaolong heard him speaking in such a dispirited manner and knew that he felt tormented by the fact that he had to capture his ‘old friend’. He couldn’t help but sigh along with Lord Longyang.

Lord Pingqu’s expression changed. “Impossible. Long ago, I ordered my servants to search every inch of the manor. If he was here, he couldn’t have hidden from me, much less the noses of my hounds.”

General Fan said, “We have questioned the former subordinates of Lord Xinling. We verified that in the past, Xiang Shaolong must have used some sort of tunnel-like passageway to escape. But no one knows where the entry point and exit point are.”

Lord Longyang added, “Lord Pingqu, you could go and ask every single person in the manor if they had noticed any food or clothing gone missing. From this, you would be able to determine whether or not Xiang Shaolong is hiding here.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this move as being formidable. How could he dare to stay behind and listen for any longer? He hurriedly snuck back down again and closed the lid, covered it with the previous woven mattresses, then returned to the tunnels.

And then, without a second thought, he snuck out towards the direction of the hilly grove.

In the midst of the snowy night, he could see soldiers light torches as they moved in the direction that he was hiding. The light of the torches and the howls of the dogs were enough to freeze a man's blood.

Xiang Shaolong put all of the stolen food in one large parcel, put the parcel on his back, then went on the road he had once taken to escape with Zhao Qian, moving in the direction of the nearby houses.

He looked around as he walked, secretly groaning.

All of the nearby roads had soldiers sealing off the passageways. Even the rooftops all had sentries installed, focusing their attention on any and all activity within Lord Xinling's manor.

Xiang Shaolong felt as though it had become hard for him to take a single step. He fell down within an underbrush next to the road.

But he quickly decided that this wasn't a safe plan either.

A troop of fifty Wei soldiers was headed in his direction. Poking their spears into every bush, they were carrying out an all-encompassing search, as thorough as a flood of mercury.

Xiang Shaolong had no other options. Before the light had reached him, he clambered towards a nearby street and hid underneath the eaves of a roof.

Because this building was a floor lower than all the surrounding buildings, no sentries were set on its roof.

The soldiers passed. Just as he was dithering over whether or not to sneak into the building, the sound of hoof steps could be heard.

A gaudily-decorated carriage was coming from the direction the soldiers had gone towards, with cavalymen escorting it front and behind.

Watching the situation, Xiang Shaolong landed on the ground again. Dodging and hiding behind a nearby tree, he quickly climbed up onto a particularly thick branch, tightly gripping the ice-covered branch with his hands.

If it weren't for the fact that it was snowing heavily right now, he wouldn't have dared to take this risk.

This could be described as a gamble.

If just a single person amongst those ten plus cavalymen lifted their heads, they would definitely see him.

But when it was snowing ferociously, everyone would lower their gaze towards the ground instead.

Just as it seemed as though his heart would leap into his mouth, the carriage arrived directly beneath him.

Xiang Shaolong first gently set unwrapped the package on his back, then gently tossed it slightly in front of the top of the carriage. He then gently swung his legs down, resting them on the package, before letting his hands

slip as he dropped down.

Because of the cushioning package, he landed on the carriage noiselessly. Just by bending down, he had accomplished something which was nearly impossible under any other situation.

The carriage continued to move forward into this ancient, snow-filled capital, slowly and unhurriedly.

He had no idea as to where the carriage would take him, but he knew that for now, he had escaped a dangerous place.

As they passed one of the gates, not only did the sentries not block the carriage's path, they even saluted respectfully as they allowed it to past beyond freely.

The status of the person inside the carriage surely was not that of an ordinary person. Otherwise, how could they be so courteous and respectful?

Right now, even he was curious as to what sort of noble person sat inside the carriage below.

The sound of a sigh seemed to drift in from the carriage.

His curiosity aroused, Xiang Shaolong pressed his ear against the carriage. But the accumulated ice and snow froze him so much that he immediately abandoned this idea.

Instead, he turned around and stared around himself.

As he stared, he was struck dumb.

My heavens! It appeared as though the carriage was winding its way through the streets in the direction of the palace.

Escorted by the guards, the carriage passed onto the drawbridge, through the moat, and into the inner palace.

In this era, regardless of size or stature, all palaces were considered forbidden zones.

All kings would exhaust themselves and their resources in making their palace an exceptionally centralized military stronghold, a castle within a castle.

This was designed to prevent invaders from attacking, but also to prevent traitors from rebelling.

Now that Xiang Shaolong had managed to get himself into the royal palace, it would be very difficult for him to leave.

Both startled and exulted, he entered the palace. He continued to lie on top of the carriage, unmoving. He allowed the snow to cover him completely. If it weren't for that, any of the sentries on top of the palace walls would see him right away and he would have nowhere to hide.

But this was precisely what worried him the most.

A huge blizzard like this was very rare. It would be very difficult for him to use this trick again to leave the palace.

Hiding underneath the snow, he pressed his face against his supply package. This could be said to be his sole remaining source of comfort.

Although he couldn't see anything, he could still hear sounds.

From the sound of the horse steps and the carriage wheels, he surmised that they were in the winding paths within the palace. They should be headed in the direction of the inner palace.

The carriage finally came to a halt. The cavalrymen all dismounted. Footsteps could be heard from all directions, followed by the inner palace maids saying in chorus, "May the Queen live ten thousand years!"

Xiang Shaolong nearly let out a cry of shock. He couldn't resist from lifting his head up slightly and sneaking a peek.

The carriage door swung open.

Underneath the snow, Dan Meimei's familiar, alluring back, dressed in gaudy clothes, wearing a 'phoenix headpiece', appeared in front of his eyes as though stepping out of a dream.

A maid raised an umbrella over her head while offering her elbow for

support. They slowly ascended a set of palace steps, followed by the palace maids and the guards in two rows. The sort of dignified aura she now had made it impossible for others to believe that she was a prostitute in Xianyang who was plucked at will by powerful officials.

Watching her back slowly disappear into the distance as she ascended the stairs, Xiang Shaolong felt a hundred emotions in his heart.

Although he knew that Dan Meimei wouldn't betray him, it was very difficult for him to come into contact with beauty who had now become a Queen.

It was too risky. And maybe Dan Meimei would betray him after all, just like Lord Longyang.

The sound of whips being cracked.

Xiang Shaolong continued on this free-of-charge tourist trip.

Right now, the carriage was definitely headed towards the stables. After the four strong horses were unsaddled, the carriage would be sent to the warehouse where all the snow would be brushed off. If he didn't leave before that, his hiding place would be exposed.

Just as Xiang Shaolong was despairing over how he would leave the carriage, the carriage arrived at a place where trees lined both sides of the road.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that heaven was assisting him. He carefully began to rise, readying his package.

At a moment when he saw that the carriage driver was wholly focused on the road ahead, he stood up.

The snow on his body slid off like sandstone. He reached out and grabbed a vertical branch, immediately escaping this carriage which had taken him out of one dangerous situation but delivered him into another.

## Chapter 7

### Leisurely Chatting Within The Forbidden Palace

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Using his grappling hook and the cover of snow, Xiang Shaolong traversed past two palatial buildings and landed within a grassy knoll located inside a courtyard.

This building was located directly behind the mansion which Dan Meimei had entered earlier. Most likely it was the place where palace servants and maids resided.

He wasn't worried about running into guards or hounds here, as those would only be stationed outside of the royal palace.

All imperial palaces, whether it be the Zhao palace, the Qin palace, or the Chu palace, were unique places, totally segregated from the universe around them.

Unless the King of Wei came to grace Dan Meimei with his presence, he wouldn't run into the King of Wei here either.

Right now, the most important thing was to find a place to hide. Only then could he seek out opportunities to procure food and find a way to escape.

Right now, he felt that the best option available was to hide for ten days or half a month. After the hullabaloo had subsided, he would sneak out the

palace.

But just as Lord Longyang said, if he continued to steal food and drinks over a long period of time, sooner or later suspicions would be raised.

The ideal option would of course be to masquerade as a palace servant, but asking him to disguise his much taller and stronger than average body frame into a weak, delicate servant's frame would be nothing more than the ravings of a madman.

Glancing around him, Xiang Shaolong saw that the wind and the snow continued to silently fall down everywhere. But light shone from each and every one of the side rooms.

Earlier, after he had traversed the various mansions, he had already memorized the various buildings like the back of his hand.

These various buildings which surrounded the central palace grounds were themselves surrounded by walls, forming an independent world.

Aside from the sentries stationed on the four surrounding walls, the only guards present were the ones stationed at the entry and exit points. No other security was present.

Dan Meimei naturally would have her own personal guards as well, but they were neither allowed to nor would attempt to enter her dwellings.

So, if he was able to sneak into this beauty's palace, he would be in the safest

of positions.

Right now, he was ensconced with an open air garden. There were gates to the east and the south, but the gates were guarded and tightly shut.

After having determined his path of movement, he made up his mind and once more flipped onto the roof.

Although the rooms of the servants were covered with ice and snow, it wasn't a third as thick as that of the city walls. In addition, the eaves of the rooms had many locations which his grappling hook could attach to. Although it was not easy to move precisely, the difficulty was hardly insurmountable for him.

When he reached the gardens located next to the inner palace, he dropped down.

Based on the architectural standards of this era, most palaces would be constructed in a place with lots of light and with intersecting river systems.

The palace of the King of Wei was basically based on an array of intersecting lines. It could roughly be divided into the front, middle, and rear districts. Arranged in a rectangular shape, it sat with its rear in the north and facing the south. The northern district was divided into fifteen sections, with the King and Queen's imperial residences occupying the primary position in the middle.

The central district was where the 'Three Courts' were held.

The 'Three Courts' referred to the Large Court, the Outer Court, and the Inner Court. Although the names were different, they basically were places where the monarch and his councilors took care of governmental affairs.

The southern district held the main gate to the palace as well as the headquarters of the local guard force. It was separated from the primary palaces by a series of five gates.

The reason why Xiang Shaolong paid so much attention to the layout of the palace was because he knew that most palaces had secret passages.

This was something which the nobility of this age would definitely install, in order to save their lives and flee as necessary.

Logically, the King of Wei's palace should also have this sort of underground escape route. If he could find it, he could sneakily and stealthily depart the capital.

Dan Meimei's personal rooms most likely had this sort of escape route as well. Most likely, there was at least a 90% chance of one.

With the 'lock opening tools' hidden within his shoes, and his previous lockpicking experience, the locks of this day and age would absolutely pose no great difficulty to him.

As long as he could find Dan Meimei's personal rooms, he would be able to easily slip away.

He contentedly hid within a cluster of underbrush, focusing on observing the activities of the palace.

Dan Meimei had just returned not too long ago. Naturally, she would first bathe and change her clothes before retiring to her bedroom.

Right now, in the palace, the only place that was lit was the place in front of him. This logically indicated that Dan Meimei hadn't yet gone to sleep.

The blizzard began to weaken, and Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed that this was not a good sign. He decided to first slip into Dan Meimei's personal rooms.

He scurried out of his hiding place and moved beneath the window of what appeared to be a stockroom. After ascertaining that nobody was within, he plucked out the miniature iron crowbar from within his shoes and slid it into the opening within the window, forcing it up.

After leaping into the room, he closed the window.

After accustoming himself to the illumination within the room, he saw rays of light peeking out from behind the door. Moving to the door, he pressed his ear against it to listen.

There was no sound from outside the door. Just as he was about to push the door open, footsteps suddenly could be heard coming from the left.

Xiang Shaolong was startled. He secretly exclaimed, 'How dangerous!' He hurriedly retreated and hid behind a large cabinet.

After the footsteps died away, Xiang Shaolong stepped forward. Pushing the door open, he carefully looked outside.

There was a long hallway outside, with three doors on each side of the hallway. It seemed as though this was where Dan Meimei's personal serving maids resided.

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was a miserably tough situation. If he simply charged out, if he ran into anybody, he would have nowhere to retreat.

But if he refused to take the risk, if Dan Meimei's serving ladies were to tidy the room up or come to the stockroom to retrieve anything, the chances of him running into someone would be even greater.

Grinding his teeth, Xiang Shaolong rushed out.

The inner palace was divided into two sections, with the middle section being an open air garden. Right now, he was located near the rear entrance. The problem right now was that he didn't know if Dan Meimei's bedroom was located in the front section or the rear section. If he knew, he wouldn't have to blindly fumble about like he was doing right now.

He swiftly arrived at a hallway crossing on the right. Just as he was about to enter the front section, two serving girls appeared headed in his direction, a scant few meters away.

Xiang Shaolong quickly drew back. He pushed open the nearest door and snuck inside without even checking to see if anyone was within.

Before he even had the chance to catch his bearings, the door was pushed open again and the two serving girls entered.

Out of options, Xiang Shaolong was forced to hide behind the opened door. All he could do was pray that they wouldn't decide to close it.

Lamps were lit. Only now did he see that he was hiding within the inner palace's dining room.

The two clearly were here to gather some food for Dan Meimei. Busy retrieving and then utilizing some supplies from the nearby cupboards, they didn't even notice in the slightest the presence of this unwelcomed guest.

One of the serving maids said, "She seems to be in an extremely bad mood. This is the first time I've seen her scold someone so ferociously."

The other maid was much less brave. In a low voice, she reprimanded, "Don't speak inappropriate things. If those vile gossips catch wind of it, it'll be terrible."

After a short period of time, the two maids took two trays of tea and snacks and left the room.

Xiang Shaolong leapt out of his hiding spot. He snatched a piece of leftover

cake, then, walking on tiptoes, followed the two of them.

Xiang Shaolong used all of his skills, slithering like a snake and scurrying like a rat, moving fast then moving slow. He avoided several passing servants before finally arriving at a main hallway.

The two maids ahead of him entered what appeared to be the inner hallway through a back entrance.

After having found the location of Dan Meimei's bedroom, he hurriedly flipped on top of the roof. Arriving beneath the eaves, he used his steel tools to push a window open, then hurriedly ducked inside.

He had entered a rectangular shaped side room, gaudily decorated with the floor covered by a thick carpet. His feet felt very comfortable stepping onto it.

Because the stove in the corner had yet to be lit, he felt certain that Dan Meimei would not come to this room.

There was a large door in the southern side of the room. Based on the direction it was in, it most likely led to the inner rooms.

By now, he had attained a thorough grasp of the layout of the palace.

The main entrance gateway towards the north led to the main hall, which was followed by two side rooms to each side of the hall.

And Dan Meimei's bedroom must be located towards the south, next to that open-air garden spot. The two rooms next door must be where her servants stayed.

He pressed his ear against the large door and listened intently.

He could hear some indistinct sounds, but not the sound of anyone speaking.

If he were to go seeking the passageway, this was the best opportunity he would have. Once Dan Meimei returned to her bedroom, he would have missed this golden chance.

Xiang Shaolong once more snuck out of this side room. Soon afterwards, he arrived within Dan Meimei's bedroom.

This was a very spacious room with gaudy furnishings. In one corner, the fireplace was burning brightly, causing the room to be as warm as the spring air. In the middle, there was an enormous embroidered bed that was pressed up against the wall, with thick rugs surrounding it.

The other corner of the room, facing the fireplace, was a large screening wall. Naturally, that is where she would go for relieving herself.

All the other dressing tables were filled with all sorts of necessary cosmetic supplies, ordered neatly and successively.

Xiang Shaolong felt a huge headache coming on. Not only would it be difficult to find a secret tunnel in such a location, the very act of trying would

immediately be visible and alert others.

The first thing he would have to do would be to lift up the rugs, and maybe even have to move the couches and other furniture around. That would be the same as moving everything in the room. How could others not help but overhear the sounds?

Even if everyone here was deaf, Dan Meimei might enter the room at any time to go to sleep. How could he have the opportunity to put everything back into its proper order?

The most annoying thing of all was that even if he managed to find the tunnel, there was no way he would be able to rearrange everything above into the proper configuration, to the point where nobody would notice that things had been moved. If anyone noticed, it would be as good as directly alerting the soldiers of Wei that he had fled from the tunnel.

Just as he was worrying about what to do, the door opened.

Frightened out of his mind, Xiang Shaolong didn't have any opportunity to flee through the window. All he could do was hide behind the screen and squat down. Next to him, just as suspected, was a delicately made chamber pot and a steel night pot. Fortunately, both the pots were clean and empty, and didn't give off any bad odours.

Sneaking a peek, he saw the person who had arrived was, indeed, Dan Meimei, who had now rose to the exalted position of the Queen of Wei. Behind her was a serving girl who looked somewhat familiar. Only after

thinking for a moment did he remember that she was one of the maids who had served Dan Meimei at the Drunken Wind Loft.

Dan Meimei's beauty had blossomed even further.

The exquisitely made formal attire set off her beauty, making up for the aura and presence that she formerly was slightly lacking in.

She gently sat down in front of the copper mirror and allowed the serving girl to remove her formal outer-wear.

The servant said softly, "Madame! Don't worry. A good man like Master Xiang has Heaven's blessings upon him. And he is so highly skilled as well. He surely has a way to escape."

Hearing his own name, Xiang Shaolong first felt a huge shock, followed by a feeling of gratitude.

He hadn't thought that a lady of the windy, dusty world (ie prostitution) whom he hadn't previously been on excellent relations with would be more loyal towards him than even Lord Longyang, just because he had helped her once, with little cost to himself.

Underneath the light of the lamp, Dan Meimei's face didn't reveal the slightest trace of joy, anger, rage, or grief. She tranquilly said, "What use would worrying be. Xiao Qing, the room is too bright."

Sighing, Xiao Qing doused the lamps in the room. The light died down, filling the room with a gentle atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong was indecisive, changing his mind again and again. In the end, he gave up his intention of asking Dan Meimei for assistance. He didn't want to risk causing Dan Meimei to lose everything that she now had.

After she fell asleep, he would sneak out and find a place to hide for the night. The next day, he would return and search for the hidden exit.

After having made up his mind, he snuck another peek from behind the screen.

By now, Dan Meimei was only wearing a single, thin, skin-tight shift that exposed every luscious inch of the lithe, voluptuous lines of her form.

Xiang Shaolong inwardly exclaimed to himself, no wonder so many men of worldly experience were wildly infatuated by her. She really was an extraordinarily beautiful woman, blessed through and through by the heavens.

Dan Meimei let out a dispirited sigh, breaking the stillness that seemed to have taken physical form within the room.

Xiao Qing sighed as well. "I'm afraid that his highness won't be coming tonight."

Dan Meimei gently said, "Right now, all he wants is Xiang Shaolong's head. How could he have the energy to come here. It's very late! Go to sleep!"

Bowing, Xiao Qing pushed the door open and left.

Turning around, Dan Meimei walked towards the screen.

Xiang Shaolong's scalp suddenly felt numb. Dan Meimei and him were now standing face to face, and their four eyes met.

Dan Meimei let out a quiet cry of surprise, then hurriedly used her hand to cover her mouth. A look of shock in her eyes, she stared disbelievingly while shaking her head.

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. "Meimei, did I surprise you?"

After stabilizing herself, Dan Meimei stretched out her jade-like hand and grasped his own large hand. She pulled him to the couch.

Moments later, the two of them were firmly ensconced in each other's arms on the embroidered couch.

After offering him a series of hot kisses, Dan Meimei quietly said, "What sort of help do you need from me? Alas! Master Xiang, your abilities really are simply remarkable. You were even able to sneak in here and find me."

Xiang Shaolong didn't originally intend to find her. Somewhat awkwardly, he said, "Meimei, when you went to the screen, were you planning to...heh heh..."

Dan Meimei's face turned red. Tossing him a glare, she clasped him firmly

around his back. As though she were in a dream, she said, “Wonderful. I finally have a chance to go to bed with you.”

Surprised, Xiang Shaolong said, “Meimei, did you really look upon me with favour?”

Embarrassed, Dan Meimei said, “I’m easily attracted to capable men, but I grow bored easily as well. But towards you, for some reason, it’s different. You should know that here and now, there’s no reason for me not to speak my mind. Originally, I did hate you. Oh, you horrible man! You never paid me any mind. But I didn’t expect that sister Yang Yu was absolutely correct in her assessment of you. You’re the sort of man who is cold on the outside but hot inside. Only you were able and willing to help me. I hadn’t had the chance to offer you thanks from my own lips!”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Hadn’t you just thanked me ‘with your own lips’ just now?”

Fiery colour burning in her jade cheeks, Dan Meimei initiated another scorching kiss, before drawing back. Seeming somewhat forlorn, she said, “Are you not interested in me at all? Why don’t you have any reaction?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that she had a huge amount of experience in handling men. He knew that she had already noticed that he wasn’t showing the normal, expected biological reaction to her attention, and thus was feeling bad about herself. He apologetically said, “For one, I feel that Meimei is a flower who already has a master, whom I shouldn’t violate. But more importantly, right now I am surrounded by danger and am worried about

how to escape. That's why it's difficult for me to relax with you and enjoy the pleasure that fish feel when they enter the water."

Dan Meimei was relieved, but then she knit her beautiful eyebrows again. "If you were able to enter, you should have the ability to leave as well, right?"

Laughing bitterly, Xiang Shaolong explained how he had entered on top of her carriage.

After listening to him, Dan Meimei nipped him, then said, "Since you have come to my door, naturally I will send you out safely as well."

Enjoying the soft and fragrant feeling of "murmuring quietly in the middle of the night" with this beauty, Xiang Shaolong's heart seemed to have melted. Sighing, he nipped her little ear. "That's too dangerous for you, and there are too many unknown variables at play. I definitely won't let you take that sort of risk."

Dan Meimei felt a surge of emotion. She sighed, "In the entire world, perhaps only Xiang Shaolong would be so considerate. Xiang Shaolong! Hurry up and think of something. As long as I am capable of doing it, I, Dan Meimei, promise you that I will."

Xiang Shaolong tightly embraced her. Pressing his face against her beautiful hair, he inhaled her fragrant scent. His entire body went weak. In a soft voice, he said, "Has your King ever told you about any secret escape routes located within your palace?"

Dan Meimei's slender body trembled. In a lovable voice, she exclaimed, "I

almost forgot! There is such a tunnel, and it's located right in my bedroom."

But then, she looked unhappy. "But the key to open it lies in the hands of the Chief Custodian. There's no way for me to open it!"

Elated, Xiang Shaolong said, "That's even better. Even if someone discovered that I had left through the tunnel, you would be able to deny everything."

Surprised, Dan Meimei asked, "You know how to pick locks?"

Xiang Shaolong withdrew slightly from her. Carefully examining her flowery, jade-like countenance that was softened even further by the glow of the lamps, he smiled and nodded. Taking another whiff of her delicate fragrance, he said, "Do you know where the exit to the tunnel is?"

His mood improving, he was starting to succumb to the allure of this comfortable blanket and began to feel a fleshly lust.

Dan Meimei could feel the pressure of him against her side. Her eyes filled with the stirrings of the desire of spring, she gazed at him for a moment before burying herself into his wide chest and saying, "The King said that the tunnel exit is half a li west of the east city gates, at a stable."

Xiang Shaolong felt that this was wonderful. This would allow him to pick out a fast horse and flee. However, he would still need to exit through the east gates. He suddenly had a thought, and asked her where she had just been.

Dan Meimei tightly embraced him. Her eyes half closed, she murmured, "I

went to visit a sister. She'll be leaving Qi tomorrow. Oh, Xiang Shaolong! You don't need to go so urgently! Life here in the palace is so regimented and so stifling. A person can die of boredom in here!"

Xiang Shaolong forced out a smile. "Do you regret coming?"

Dan Meimei opened her beautiful eyes. Staring vacantly, she said, "I don't know! I really don't know! Just yesterday, I dreamt of the Drunken Wind Loft, and dreamt of playing games with sister Yang Yu in its garden! Oh! How has she been?"

Xiang Shaolong felt a bitter feeling in his heart. He asked, "Does he treat you well?"

Dan Meimei was speechless for a long moment, then said, "I'm not sure either. Ever since he became the King of Wei, he became very ferocious. Even while he is sleeping, in his dreams, he would sometimes call for the execution of some minister or official who had offended him. If it weren't for the fact that I'm pregnant, perhaps I would beg you to take me with you."

Xiang Shaolong's lust immediately cooled to nothingness and he woke up. He told himself that at such a critical juncture, he needed to preserve his strength. He had just suffered a serious illness not too long ago, making it even more inappropriate for himself to be enjoying himself with Dan Meimei right now. Changing the subject, he said, "Was the sister you just visited the leader of the Three Famous Courtesans, Miss Feng Fei?"

Dan Meimei nodded. "Yes! We even discussed you. She esteems you

greatly.”

She grew excited. “How about I plead with her to secretly take you outside the city? She is a very capable person!”

Xiang Shaolong abruptly shook his head. “No! I don’t want to implicate any more people. Why is she going to the country of Qi?”

Dan Meimei replied, “It’s for the King of Qi’s 50th birthday. I heard that Shi Sufang and Lan Gongyuan are both planning to go for the celebration. Every country, including even Qin, will be sending representatives to celebrate.”

Xiang Shaolong was growing more and more confused as he listened. Surprised, he said, “Aren’t Yan and Zhao at war with Qi? How did their relations improve so much?”

Dan Meimei shook her head. “I’m not too sure about these sorts of matters either. From what the King said, it seems as though the King of Qi still hasn’t decided who the Crown Prince should be. The choice will implicate Tian Dan’s powerbase, so the King has a decided interest in the question of who the Crown Prince will be.”

Right now, Xiang Shaolong didn’t even have time to take care of himself, much less care about the internal affairs of Qi. In a soft voice, he said, “Dear Meimei! Please tell me where the entrance to the tunnel is!”

Aghast, Dan Meimei said, “Don’t be so quick to leave, alright? I have ways of hiding you here for many days! Wait for the search to die down before

leaving. Isn't that safer?"

Xiang Shaolong kissed her fragrant lips before saying, "No! I need to sneak out now, while the blizzard is still here. Once the snow disappears, it will be impossible for me to leave."

Unwilling to part from him, Dan Meimei tightly clasped his waist. She mournfully said, "When I embrace you, it feels like I am embracing all of the things which were important to me in the past. But you are so unwilling to remain behind and want to leave so urgently. Xiang Shaolong! Please don't be so heartless towards me!"

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong felt touched. He knew that Dan Meimei hadn't really fallen in love with him. What she felt towards him was a complicated mixture of gratitude and memories of the past. With the palace being so stifling, she desperately desired for him to stay behind and accompany her.

But he still felt some degree of empathy for her. He gently sucked on her soft, warm red lips, then gently said, "How could I bear to be heartless towards you? But right now, I have to save my energy, because I have a very difficult road that I must travel."

Dan Meimei returned his kiss. Her cheeks as scarlet as the setting sun, she said, "Fine, I won't force you anymore! But you should at least make an expression of good faith, such as caressing my body. That way, in the future, you won't easily forget about me, Dan Meimei."

Listening, Xiang Shaolong felt as though his blood was about to boil.

To tell the truth, in a situation like this, where he was embracing the writhing, naked body of this voluptuous woman filled with the energy of youth, while the gentle, warm smell of the blanket entered his nostrils, if he were to claim that his vessels were not expanding to the point of explosion, he would be lying through his teeth.

He couldn't help but reach out and place his hand on her firm posterior and let his hand roam about.

Dan Meimei immediately began to breathe rapidly. Like an eel, she began to writhe on his lap, her soft body pressing against him, filling Xiang Shaolong with even more fiery lust.

Xiang Shaolong's hands increased their roaming area, sliding from her thighs all the way to her petite face. The ineffable process of his hands sliding up filled both of them with the ecstatic, stimulating feeling of having a tempestuous affair.

Xiang Shaolong was like a fully drawn bow, with no choice but to shoot. Just as he was about to press her down beneath him, Dan Meimei pushed him away. She panted delicately and thinly, "The entrance to the tunnel is beneath the main armoire. There's a trapdoor beneath it. Open that up, and you'll see the locked entrance to the tunnel."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked awake. He felt a sense of gratitude in his heart. He knew that she was afraid of exhausting his strength, which was why she forcibly controlled her own urges.

After sharing a kiss with her that was so scorching, it nearly set the two of them aflame, he jumped off the couch. Just as he was about to push the armoire aside, he suddenly remembered something. “Are there any other entrances?”

Dan Meimei said, “There are two other entrances in the imperial gardens. Everyone in the palace knows about them.”

Xiang Shaolong gave her a last hug. “That makes it even better. With multiple entrances, even if someone finds out that I left through the tunnel, nobody would suspect you of any complicity.”

After this last, lingering embrace, he finally stepped down into this road which would save his life.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Song And Dance Troupe**

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Without any danger or experiencing anything alarming, Xiang Shaolong exited from the tunnel.

The exit was located at the side of the wall of a large well located inside a horse stable. The exit was located at least seven or eight feet above the surface of the water, and there were footholds leading to the top of the well.

By the time he stuck his head out of the well, the snow had already stopped. Slight hints of light could be seen coming through the sky. A barn was laid out to his right, along with group homes of several stable hands.

This type of stable was very common, both the state owned ones and the privately owned ones. Most of the horses came from the pastures outside of the city, and were purchased by the rich and influential people of the city.

Xiang Shaolong snuck into the barn. He was wondering whether or not he should steal a horse, but also was concerned that his motivations might be too apparent. Suddenly, voices could be heard. Startled, he hurriedly hid in a corner, covering himself with the sweet grass which was fed to the horses.

Two people came.

One person said, "Master Zhang, please rest your mind. My superiors have

long since made arrangements for me to provide you with the finest horse we have. Ah! In all of Daliang, is there anyone who doesn't want to see the world-renowned song and dance of the young lady? For me to be of the slightest assistance to her is a tremendous honour."

The fellow surnamed Zhang clearly knew how to put on airs. He just let out a bored 'humph'. Arriving near to where Xiang Shaolong was hidden, he said, "This horse seems good. Its teeth are uniform and white as snow. What sort of horse is it?"

That stable master said, "This is a purebred horse from the deer pastures of the far north. It's both attractive and hardy. Master Zhang, you have a good eye!"

The fellow surnamed Zhang was silent for a moment, before saying, "Did you find the charioteer I ordered you to locate? This really has been a huge bother to us. A perfectly good employee suddenly became sick and died, forcing me to run about trying to find a replacement."

The stable master said, "How would I dare to slack off in the slightest in my duties for the young lady and for Master Zhang? I already found someone known as Shen Liang. He previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, and is an expert in martial arts as well. He also looks extremely handsome. For sure, he fulfills Master Zhang's criteria."

Continuing, he said in a low voice, "He's an old friend of mine. Master Zhang, I'm sure you understand. Right now, nobody in Daliang dares to use the former subordinates of Prince Wuji. Otherwise, for someone of Shen Liang's

talents, how could he remain unemployed for over two years?”

The fellow surnamed Zhang coldly snickered. “Where is he?”

The stable master smiled as well. “He didn’t know that Master Zhang would come here so early. I expect he’s still sleeping. Master Zhang, why don’t you first go to the inner hall and have a hot cup of tea. I’ll call him up and have him meet you right away.”

The fellow surnamed Zhang said, “How do I have the free time to drink tea? First get the horse for me, and I’ll pay you right away. Later, summon that fellow to see me. If he’s late, don’t blame me for not waiting for him. You’d best know that we have other options for our charioteer as well.”

This was followed by the sound of the horse being walked over, then the two of them going to another stable.

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that heaven was helping him. He hurriedly put on the clothes that he had previously stolen.

These clothes were the most unattractive clothes in Lord Pingqu’s chest of clothes. It was very suitable for the likes of a Shen Liang, someone who was the former servant of a fallen noble house.

By the time he had finished hiding his old clothes in a secret location, the stable master had already left the stable and was headed in the direction of the sleeping rooms. Clearly, he was going to go wake Shen Liang up.

Xiang Shaolong hurried out. Seeing that the fellow surnamed Zhang was staring at four horses, he coughed and bowed all the way to the ground. "Your humble servant, Shen Liang, requests that Master Zhang forgive me for my tardiness."

Master Zhang didn't expect him to arrive so quickly. He glanced at him a few times. A look of satisfaction appearing in his eyes, his gaze dropped to 'Blood Wave', which hung from Xiang Shaolong's waist. He calmly said, "My name is Zhang Quan. I'm the manager for Miss Feng. You had previously served as the charioteer for Prince Wuji, so you naturally know all the rules. Five taels of silver a month, and if Miss Feng is satisfied with you, you can work for us permanently." Zhang Quan was roughly thirty years or so of age, had an intelligent face, but had a very vulgar air to him. Above his lips were two slanting thick mustaches, giving him the appearance of a man who indulged too much in wine and sex.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly agreed.

Zhang Quan said, "We don't have much time. Let's go. It's about to start snowing again."

Xiang Shaolong secretly thanked both the heavens and the earth. Picking up his cloak, he took the reins of the horses and walked them out.

The departure of the city was unexpectedly easy.

The most ironical part of it was that the number of people who came to send them off was vast beyond counting. And yet, he, the most wanted criminal in

the city, was able to saunter away in their midst.

Before they had reached the city walls, snow once again began to fall. Putting on his cloak and hood, he wrapped a wind-blocking mask around his face, lowering his head to avoid the wind. Combined with the fact that he was wearing very ordinary and appropriate attire, naturally not a single person suspected him. The most miraculous thing of all was that, as he was seated in the position of the charioteer, nobody could tell that he had a massive, powerful physique.

He was originally afraid that Feng Fei would recognize him, but fortunately, he didn't even have the chance to meet her.

To be honest, right now, with his face covered by a beard, even if Feng Fei paid him any mind, she would be hard pressed to easily see through the disguise and recognize him as Xiang Shaolong.

It was actually funny, come to think of it. He didn't want to disturb Dan Meimei, but in the end, it was through her assistance that he left the palace. He wanted even less to involve Feng Fei, with whom he had no relationship at all, but in the end, he had to rely on her to help him charge through this final barrier of the city gates.

This could really be described as coming back from death's door.

He hoped that this time, things would go smoothly and he would easily return to Qin.

Naturally, he didn't want to go to Qi. As soon as he saw an opportunity to do so, he would slip away.

The people of Wei were extremely courteous to Feng Fei. They sent an escort of five hundred light cavalry to accompany them, led by General Ao Xiang.

Feng Fei's song and dance troupe was a strong force of many men, fully filling over ten large vehicles. In all, including the dancers, the musicians, and the serving girls, they numbered more than two hundred. Paying their salary alone was certainly an enormous expenditure. From this, one could tell how heavy Feng Fei's income must be. He couldn't help but begin thinking about that world-class beauty seated in the carriage behind him, and began to think about that day where the two of them quietly murmured touching words to each other in the small manor in Qin.

She was the equivalent of a musical superstar of the 21st century. Only, the people who were given the chance to enjoy her music were only the utmost nobility. Ordinary people would almost never have that sort of good fortune.

After the team of carriages left Daliang, it passed through a major ravine and headed straight north. When it arrived at flowing water, there were five huge three-sailed ships awaiting them.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong come to understand why they had to leave so early. By now, it was already sundown.

When he saw the cavalry escort also board the boats, he couldn't help but groan silently.

If he was forced all the way to the country of Qi in such a manner, it would be absolutely terrible for him.

Flowing along with the river, it wouldn't take more than four or five days for the boat to arrive at Qi's borders. By then, if he wanted to return to the Zhao border, it would cost him a huge amount of additional effort.

But he didn't have any other options for the moment. Steeling himself, he boarded the ship.

Of the five large ships, the people of Wei occupied three while Feng Fei and her people occupied two.

Compared to the previous days, where he was facing the soldiers of Wei on a daily basis, Xiang Shaolong felt much more at ease.

The boat he was on was the boat on which Feng Fei lived. At this point in time, his status in the song and dance troupe was the lowest of the low. He was assigned to a room in the bottommost deck, a tiny room with just one window which he had to share with other low-ranked servants. The six of them shared that single room.

Maybe it was because they were jealous of him snatching the prominent position of being Feng Fei's carriage driver, but the others all linked together to shun him. As soon as they entered the room, they would immediately begin to gamble, but they wouldn't invite him to take part.

Xiang Shaolong was more than happy to let the situation remain this way. After dinner, he burrowed onto a sleeping mat in a corner of the room and immediately closed his eyes.

Those people intentionally said mocking words, including words that were designed to denigrate his 'master', Lord Xinling. Xiang Shaolong found their technique of 'pointing at the mulberry tree and insulting the locust tree' (ie, to insult someone by proxy) to be hilarious. He honestly didn't care at all and shortly drifted into a deep sleep.

After sleeping for an unknown period of time, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his upper thigh. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was a charioteer named Gu Ming who had given him a kick.

Furious, Xiang Shaolong sat up and shouted, "What's that for?"

Another charioteer named Fu Yan hugged his knees. With a rascally, gangster-like attitude, he sat leaned against a corner wall and laughed, "Shen Liang, where were you born? Is your last name Zhu (pig)? Otherwise, how could you sleep as deeply as a slaughtered pig?"

The others roared in laughter as well, their voices filled with contempt and mockery.

There was a person there named Fang Sheng. He was the only one who did not mock Xiang Shaolong. He quietly said, "Don't mock him. Shen Liang! It's light now. Come with me."

Xiang Shaolong suppressed the rage in his heart and followed him out.

Arriving on the deck, he saw that the sky was growing clear. White clouds drifted about on both sides of the horizon. His heart grew calm, and all of the unhappy thoughts from earlier fled to the back of his mind.

All the servants were in line waiting for their first meal of the day. Another group of people were fetching water to wash themselves. It was noisy all around him, giving off a very lively atmosphere.

A rather attractive female servant, accompanied by two strong-looking women, was in the middle of talking to Zhang Quan. Seeing Xiang Shaolong's majestic physique, a weighing, interested look appeared in her eyes as she thoroughly checked him out.

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely uncomfortable at her searching gaze. Fang Sheng whispered in his ears, "That's the servant girl of our Second Mistress, Dong Shuzhen. Her name is Sister Xiaoling. We all call her the 'Little Chili Pepper'. Relying on the favor of the Second Mistress, she loves to show off her authority. If you don't need anything from her, best not to get involved with her."

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong was laughing bitterly. He had always been a person who proudly stood above others. He didn't expect that even amongst the servants, there were differences of rank and seniority.

After washing his face alongside Fang Sheng, it was their turn to get their food. They went to a corner and began to eat and drink.

Fang Sheng said, "Are you still angry about what happened earlier? Honestly, the one they are angry with is Zhang Quan. Gu Ming is a subordinate of the Deputy Manager, Sha Li. The Manager intentionally wanted to dampen their spirits. That's why he hired you, a total newcomer, and gave you this position which everyone else was fighting over. If it weren't for the fact that they fear going too overboard would offend the Manager, you would have even more trouble to bear."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why, despite there being so many people here, he was the one selected to be used. In his heart, he felt very lucky.

Fang Sheng saw him accept this silently. He too stopped speaking.

Xiang Shaolong still felt unhappy in his heart. "Brother Fang, how long have you been with the Mistress?"

Fang Sheng said, "Three years now."

Xiang Shaolong very much wanted to ask him detailed questions about Feng Fei, but he felt it would seem inappropriate. He changed the question. "Brother Fang, do you have a family?"

The corner of Fang Sheng's mouth quirked into a bitter smile. "How can a servant from a vanquished country talk about families or lineages? If it weren't for the Mistress's pity, I, Fang Sheng, most likely would've frozen to death on some street long ago."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned for a long moment. Finally, he lowered his head and ate. At the same time, he began to ask Fang Sheng one question after another about the song and dance troupe.

At this time, a solidly built male servant came next to Xiang Shaolong. He coldly said, "Are you Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong remembered his current status. He hurriedly stood up and said, "Elder brother, what instructions do you have for me?"

The strong servant arrogantly said, "My name is Kun Shan. I'm Master Zhang's deputy. You can just call me Brother Shan. I hear that you know how to use the sword. Let me see your sword!"

Although Xiang Shaolong wasn't willing, he had no choice, and could only pull out the sword and offer it.

Who would've thought that Kun Shan's expression would turn ugly. He shouted, "Is your other hand broken?"

Xiang Shaolong almost let him have it with a punch. He could only lift up the sword with both hands and offer it.

Most of the male servants of Feng Fei were outfitted with longswords, and Kun Shan naturally was not an exception. But compared to this precious sword 'Blood Wave', they of course were far inferior.

As soon as Kun Shan saw the sword, his eyes immediately lit up.

Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling greedy. Not letting the other speak, he immediately said, “This is a precious sword passed down to me by my ancestors. If the sword remains, the man remains. If the sword dies, the man dies as well.”

He took the first step to prevent the other from speaking.

A look of utter envy on Kun Shan’s face, Kun Shan played with it for a long moment before being willing to return it to Xiang Shaolong. Stiffening his face, he said, “Master Zhang wants to see you. Come with me.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that even the most senior of officials didn’t put on airs like these people did. Laughing bitterly inside, he followed the man to the uppermost deck.

This vessel was over three hundred feet long. Compared to the largest warships of the Qin, the ‘Great Wings’, it was nearly twice as long. That’s because this ship was only used to carry freight. It didn’t need to be nimble, it only had to be stable.

The hull of the ship was slender and merely twenty feet across. Its head and its tail pointed upwards, and two arching masts were installed near the ship’s bow, along with another at the aft.

Between these two mast sections was the cabin, which was divided into three layers. The top layer was built on top of the deck, while the bottom

layer was built beneath it.

Feng Fei and a group of song and dance courtesans with status naturally would stay on the uppermost, most comfortable cabin. First class managers and serving girls would stay on the second cabin. People like Xiang Shaolong, with the lowest status, would naturally stay in the lowest, nastiest bottom cabin.

When accounting for the sailors, this ship had at least a hundred people on it, making for a uniquely raucous, lively atmosphere.

By this era, water-borne transportation is already very widespread and developed. Sayings such as "Cannot go on for a single day if the oars are neglected" were already in existence. [Translator's note: Referring to countries which are heavily dependent on maritime trade.]

Especially in the southern provinces, so full of rivers and streams, water-borne transportation has long been the primary form of transport. In times of constant warfare, a navy is absolutely essential, and even civilian ships are very popular.

In the past, whenever Xiang Shaolong was in a boat, he 'proudly sat on top'. This was his first time experiencing the taste of being one of the 'little people'.

At the moment, Zhang Quan was staring out while leaning against a railing on a terrace. By his side, he had two men who looked like bodyguards. He looked very pretentious.

Xiang Shaolong approached Zhang Quan and saluted him. However, Zhang Quan was indifferent and did not even spare a glance at him. He stood there, enjoying the winter breeze.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. Zhang Quan's arrogance is undeniable and this arrogant behavior has been picked up by his followers as well.

From his conversation with Fang Sheng, he has acquired a general understanding of the Song and Dance Troupe.

The top hierarchy naturally goes to the Head of the Three Courtesans, Feng Fei.

The next in authority would be twelve other courtesans who are Feng Fei's regular singing and dancing companions. All twelve ladies are number one rated beauties. Among the twelve courtesans, Dong Shuzen, who is also known as Second Mistress, helms the group.

Dong Shuzen is able to stand out from the other courtesans because she is the only other courtesan other than Feng Fei who is able to write songs and compose lyrics.

Troupe Manager Zhang Quan and Assistant Manager Sa Li are leaders too in their own capacity. They are responsible for all affairs pertaining to the Troupe. In addition, Sa Li does recruitment for chariot drivers, food supplies and kitchen helpers. In this instance when Zhang Quan personally recruited Feng Fei's chariot driver, he is opening overriding Sa Li's authority and

starting a power tussle between them.

Below the courtesans are the talented musicians and serving maids. Due to their proximity to Feng Fei and the twelve courtesans, they do not hold any appointments but wield considerable authority.

The musicians are lead by Conductor Yun Liang, who is a retired courtesan. She conducts training for new courtesans and is held in the highest regard by Feng Fei. Therefore, no one dares to make trouble for her.

Among the serving maids, Feng Fei's personal maid Little Ping'er and Dong Shuzhen's personal maid Sister Ling wield the most influence. Xiang Shaolong has met Little Ping'er in Xianyang and the pretty maid he met earlier on the ship is Sister Ling. Due to their mistresses positions, even Manger Zhang Quan has to give in to the wishes of the two maids.

Since the establishment of the Zhou Clan(?自周室立邦后), music and entertainment are highly regarded, leading to a thriving industry for Song and Dance Troupes such as these. These troupes often tour the different States and even have annual performances. They are wildly popular and welcomed wherever they travel. For superstar troupes such as Feng Fei's, they are treated with the same pleasantries that Lords and Marquises are expected to receive. These dance troupes remain neutral politically and are not affected by the State wars.

After keeping Xiang Shaolong painfully waiting for an extended period, Zhang Quan questioned, "I heard Gu Ming and his guys gave you trouble on several occasions, is it true?"

Not knowing his true intentions, Xiang Shaolong replied, “They are truly not the friendliest people around but I can still take their crap.”

Zhang Quan turned around in one swift motion and dissed, “I thought you were a martial arts expert? This kind of trouble should be familiar to you. You were kicked in the butt and yet did not retaliate - what kind of hero are you?”

His two bodyguards and Kun Shan, who was standing behind began to snigger in agreement and to flatter their boss.

Perplexed, Xiang Shaolong explained, “I am concerned that I should not create trouble since I am a newcomer. It may look bad on Master Zhang (Quan) too. If Master Zhang thinks that it is fine to retaliate, I will know how to act the next time.”

In fact, only Xiang Shaolong knows about his personal dilemma. When things go out of proportion, he may get the attention of Feng Fei and be identified, blowing his cover. However, it will be really ideal if Sa Li can give him the sack instead when he causes trouble and he can leave the troupe at the next landing.

Despite Dan Meimei’s opinion that Feng Fei admires Xiang Shaolong, the human heart is difficult to fathom and no one can indeed tell for sure.

He has finally escaped countless struggles, hardships and his pursuers. There is no way he will risk returning back to his fugitive lifestyle.

Hearing his words, Zhang Quan calmed down.

On his left, the tall bodyguard hinted, “Master Zhang (Quan) considers you worthy and has given you such a good position. You must prove yourself and not make him lose face.”

Since he came to ancient China and began his journey initially with Tao Fang, Xiang Shaolong has spent every day in a power tussle. Understanding the hint, he secretly acknowledged Zhang Quan’s prowess. This is a brilliant plan to reap rewards without sowing.

His employment is done on purpose, inciting anger from Assistant Manager Sa Li’s clique. When things go out of hand, Zhang Quan can report to the courtesans that Sa Li is discriminating against newcomers. He can use the opportunity to reprimand Sa Li and magnify his faults.

Sa Li is on the other ship and has no chance to defend himself. This is definitely an invincible blow to Sa Li.

With just a small effort, he can reduce Sa Li’s influence and send a message to all the other troupe workers that Zhang Quan is the most capable around.

It is amazing that such a simple employment is mired in a much larger conspiracy, the power grabbing tactics in the Song and Dance Troupe.

The lifespan of a Song and Dance Troupe is limited. When Feng Fei decides to retire or get married, the troupe will have to disband. On the good side, there are generous retrenchment benefits to all the workers when a troupe

disbands. According to Fang Sheng, that is his biggest dream - working till disbandment to receive a windfall.

Behind him, Kun Shan interrupted, “Even if someone is killed, as long as you are not the one who started the fight, Master Zhang (Quan) will stand up for you, understand?”

Speechless, Xiang Shaolong nodded his head with resignation.

Zhang Quan’s voice became more accommodating and swore, “As long as you are loyal to me, I, Zhang Quan, will not treat you shabbily. Look at your skinny frame and yellow skin. I am sure you have had your fair share of trouble over the past two years. Just do your best! Since you have served Wei Wuji (Prince Xinling) before, you should understand my intentions.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that his appearance has drastically changed since he has been on the run. Besides his new beard, he has slimmed down a lot. Even if he came face to face with Feng Fei or Little Ping’er once again, they could hardly identify him.

During their initial meeting at the loft (Drunken Wind Brothel), the lights are dim and most of their time is spent sitting down and chatting. Given the present circumstances and his new look, it is highly possible to evade their recognition.

With this new thought, he felt his happiness surging.

After Zhang Quan left him, Xiang Shaolong returned to the second deck

holding but discovered that Fang Sheng is no longer around. He headed towards the ship's hull to look for him and chanced upon the ship's cabins. He entered a narrow corridor along the cabin doors when someone blocked his way and scolded, "Didn't Manager Zhang tell you about the rules? Workers are not allowed to come to the hull. If you frighten the ladies, you will be in for a good time."

Xiang Shaolong had a shock and looked further ahead. He saw a poutish and yet cute serving maid, staring him down with her large almond-shaped eyes. Her fierce stare and her arms akimbo reminded him of a tigress.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly apologized and turned back. He retreated back to the ship's lower bunk and fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up to music playing from the upper decks. It must be Feng Fei and the courtesans rehearsing their performances.

The afternoon sun shone in through a small cabin window. He was alone in the bunk.

Xiang Shaolong sat upright with his blanket still snug around him. Leaning against the ship's wall, he was thinking about the lunch service he had missed when Fang Sheng came into the bunk with a bowl of rice that was piled high with green vegetables. Offering him the bowl, he added: "I can tell that you are sleeping very soundly and do not wish to interrupt your sleep. So I prepare a bowl for you especially."

Touched, Xiang Shaolong ate two mouthfuls before enquiring, "Does Brother

Fang (Sheng) have any relatives?"

Fang Sheng sat down beside him and was quiet for a few seconds. He then simply announced: "They were all killed in battle!"

From his tone, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew things were much more complicated than what he was sharing.

Fang Sheng has a fine bearing and behaves with a certain class. He could well be the son of a nobleman. When the country is devastated, he was forced to flee for his life and ended up joining Feng Fei's Song and Dance Troupe as a chef.

Fang Sheng continued, "I have no other ambitions. I just want to make some money, find a quiet place to build a house, buy some fields and become a farmer. I will never want to face these crooks ever again."

Xiang Shaolong observed his haggard features and estimated his age to be about the same as his own. However, they bore scars of numerous toils and hardships. In a sudden burst of sympathy, he nearly wanted to present his two gold ingots as a present to Fang Sheng, fulfilling his dream. He quickly suppressed this unwise thought before turning his attention back to his meal.

Fang Sheng suggested, "At sunset, the ship will dock at Gu City and will raise anchor only tomorrow. Why don't we enter the city and find some chicks to entertain ourselves? If Brother Shen (Xiang Shaolong) is broke, I can always lend you the money first."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, "I thought you are saving for your house and your farmland?"

Fang Sheng reasoned, "Some money is meant to be saved, some money is meant to be spent. Lowly beings like us must also find joy in life. We are unlike Zhang Quan and other rich men who can go for top courtesans. We must remember to avoid Gu Ming and his gang. I noticed him whispering to his family warriors earlier and overheard your name. They may find trouble with you."

Infuriated, Xiang Shaolong gave a cold snort and maintained his silence. He secretly swore to teach them a lesson they will never forget. Otherwise, he will always be at their mercy.

He checked himself for having such foolish thoughts.

If he do not use this golden opportunity to make good his escape, he will be a really big idiot.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Battle for Power**

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The sky is still lighted when the ships docked at Gu City pier.

A jubilant Fang Sheng is about to lead Xiang Shaolong into the city for some entertainment when Zhang Quan summoned, “Miss Feng needs the carriage. Prepare it now.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, “Where is the carriage?”

Zhang Quan is displeased, “Are your eyes only good for looking at butts? Can’t you see the carriage at the pier?”

The words have barely left Xiang Shaolong’s mouth when he knew he is in for a scolding.

The carriage may be transported in the other ship but it has already been driven down to the pier. Xiang Shaolong is overly anxious to escape and wasn’t watching his words.

Fang Sheng secretly nudged him and Xiang Shaolong knowingly followed Fang Sheng down the gangplank, disembarking from the ship.

He was in a state of confusion and out of a sudden, he was viciously pushed from behind. Before he could figure out what is happening, Xiang Shaolong

lost his balance and fell forward, knocking heavily into Fang Sheng.

Both men staggered and half roll, half fell down the gangplank onto solid ground. If not for the railings at the side of the gangplank, they could have possibly fallen into the river.

Xiang Shaolong climbed back onto his feet while Fang Sheng is clutching his left with a contorted expression on his face. The pain is causing him to break into cold sweat.

Loud laughter is heard from the ship.

Gu Ming and the other chariot drivers were jeering and laughing at their misfortune. They were accompanied by a short but muscular strongman.

Someone called out, "Shen Liang, I initially thought you are tall and well built, but today I finally realize you are just an empty vessel, a tool without a purpose. Just a small accidental bump from our Brother Wu Xun is good enough to cause you to turn topsy turvy. And I thought you are supposed to be an expert martial arts practitioner."

Xiang Shaolong recognised the speaker to be Fu Yan, one of Gu Ming's key confederates. Concurrently, he committed the family warrior Wu Xun's name to memory.

Zhang Quan appeared at the stern of the ship. He bellowed to Gu Ming and his gang: "What is going on?"

Gu Ming casually replied: "If the two of them don't even know how to disembark a ship, it is no issue of mine."

Following that, his group scampered down to the pier and fled into the distance.

Zhang Quan furiously glimpsed at the mud ridden and disheveled Xiang Shaolong before cursing, "Useless fellow!" He turned around and disappeared.

Xiang Shaolong is genuinely angry now. He silently helped Fang Sheng up. The poor Fang Sheng is groaning, "My leg! I think it is broken!"

How Xiang Shaolong wished he could give chase after Gu Ming and his gang, killing every single one of them to appease his anger. He apologized, "I have caused you misfortune!"

Fang Sheng bitterly smiled, "I guessed they want to injure you and prevent you from driving the carriage. Ai! Looks like our plans for tonight have to be cancelled!"

By now, several other troupe workers have arrived at their position, assisting Xiang Shaolong to move Fang Sheng back on the ship.

Upon reaching the deck, a female voice rang out, "What the hell are you guys up to? How dare you block Miss Feng's path?"

Xiao Shaolong saw the danger and quickly lowered his head and bowed. At

the same time, he moved Fang Sheng to the side.

He stole a quick peep and saw a veiled Feng Fei standing right in front of him. Beside her is Little Ping'er who is still dressed up as a boy. They are escorted by four other maids and about a dozen family warriors. The courtesan is assessing Xiang Shaolong.

Little Ping'er, who has apparently failed to recognise Xiang Shaolong, was incensed. "What has happened?" she demanded.

Zhang Quan and another man appeared out of nowhere and before he could speak out, the handsome man beside him interjected, "It is just a small accident."

He continued to face Xiang Shaolong and berated, "You are the newcomer right? Useless bum! Shouldn't you be going to your carriage now? Do you expect Head Mistress (Feng Fei) to wait for you instead?"

Hearing his sarcastic scolding, implying that Zhang Quan is incompetent, Zhang Quan's face darkened.

At this moment, Feng Fei's angelic voice sang out from beneath the veil: "Assistant Manager Sa!" Her voice carried some hints of disdain.

Having accomplished his goal, a smug Sa Li kept quiet.

Feng Fei shot a look at Xiang Shaolong and plainly ordered, "Be more careful next time. Send Fang Sheng back into the room before coming to the

carriage.”

Xiang Shaolong was extremely relieved that neither the Mistress nor her maid could pinpoint his real identity.

Watching her descend down the gangplank and supported by her companions, Xiang Shaolong can only force out a miserable sigh.

He can no longer slip off just like that.

Moreover, he felt an obligation to take care of Fang Sheng until he has fully recovered.

This is one of his life guiding principles.

Unknowingly, it began snowing again.

Reflected by the strong rays of the setting sun, the small flakes seemed to dance freely in the air before reluctantly landing on the ground, finishing a short but mesmerizing journey.

Time seems to have slowed down and the land purified with every layer of snow.

Xiang Shaolong directed the horses and began chauffeuring the beauty.

Four family warriors are in front paving a way for the carriage to pass through. Another eight family warriors are following the carriage.

Wei's Assistant Commanding General Ao Xiang brought a dozen of his best soldiers and they flanked the carriage on both sides, showcasing the importance of Feng Fei's stature in the eyes of all the political leaders.

She is akin to a 21st century superstar celebrity with popular hit songs, unlike the typical courtesan who prostitute herself under the guise of entertainment.

Even without the burden of Fang Sheng, Xiang Shaolong will find it challenging to flee under the heavy escort.

Escape is still conceivable but it will raise Ao Xiang's suspicions.

Fortunately, Ao Xiang regarded Xiang Shaolong as Feng Fei's long serving carriage driver and did not have the slightest suspicion about him.

Meanwhile, Xiang Shaolong has no idea where he is and is blindly driving in the direction of the family warriors ahead of him.

With the hoofbeats sounding in the background, the carriage entourage eventually approached a snow-clad city without much incident.

Most of the shops are open for business and judging from the signboards, most of the businesses are involved in carpentry, sewing, fabrics, and embroidery.

Xiang Shaolong may not have any deep understanding of culture and based

on his keen observation skills, he can tell that compared to all the cities he has been to, Gu City has a remarkably cultural and retro aura.

In this instant, Ao Xiang rode towards the side of the carriage and lowered his head, striking a conversation with Feng Fei, “In the past, when Jing’s (annihilated state) Han Xuan Zi came to the State of Lu (annihilated state), he came across Chancellor Lu’s secret literature collection. He sighed that ‘All of Zhou’s Literature is in Lu’. Now that Miss (Feng Fei) is back here again, I am sure you must be feeling emotional.”

Xiang Shaolong shuddered. So this was originally the State of Lu, which belongs to the State of Wei now.

Even the great Confucius was born here. It is no wonder why this State has such a strong arts culture.

Feng Fei sighed slowly and in a pained tone, “Yes. It is all because of this incident. If we, the citizens of Lu, are not overly stubborn and traditional, placing too much importance on the conservative ways, we may not be controlled first by Qi (State), then by Wu(State), followed by Yue (Yue was eventually annihilated by Wei, explains Ji Yanran originally in Wei). Although we have the honour of being named: The Clan of Saints, we are eventually an annihilated State. General Ao is giving us too much credit.”

Xiang Shaolong detected the melancholy in her voice and can feel his own emotions surging. Theoretically, Feng Fei is not a Song Princess but a Lu Princess. Nonetheless, Lu and Song are neighbouring States and she may be connected to both States.

Ao Xiang's flattery has backfired and after a few awkward exchanges, he resumed his riding position after noticing Feng Fei's lack of interest in chatting with him.

The entourage travelled along a winding path, deviating gradually from the main road. Consequently, they were headed towards a desolate area west of the City.

Under the illumination of the lanterns, the flying snow and strong wind resembles a scene from never ending dream.

Xiang Shaolong can comprehend the agony of the beauty behind him. When Xiao Pan eventually unites the States, Ao Xiang and everybody else will become citizens of annihilated States. Such a feeling is hard to fathom.

The sunset is beautiful but it only lasts for a fleeting moment.

This can be the autobiography of the Six States right now.

The carriages drove through a sparse forest and halted near a mausoleum.

Xiang Shaolong finally realized that Feng Fei is here to pay her respects to her ancestors.

Feng Fei and everyone alighted from their carriages. Accompanied by Ao Xiang, they walked towards the mausoleum and disappeared behind the trees.

Xiang Shaolong, the family warriors and the Wei soldiers stayed with the carriages. Momentarily, sounds of crying can be heard.

Upon their return, Little Ping'er and the maids' pretty eyes were all red and swollen. The exception was Feng Fei's as she is hiding behind the veil.

It was deep into the night when everyone boarded the ship.

Everyone including Gu Ming had gone into the city for a wild night of partying. Only an incensed Fang Sheng remained behind.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that his left foot is bandaged clumsily with a few pieces of cloth. He enquired, "How is it?"

Fang Sheng eyes reddened, "If not for my leg injury, I would have fought it out with them."

Xiang Shaolong has been trained in basic bone fixing skills and opened up the bandages. Feeling the leg bone structures, he heaved a sigh of relief, "It is simply a bone that has been displaced. Come! Bear with it for a while!"

Before Fang Sheng yelled out in pain and his eyes sockets are swelled up with tears, Xiang Shaolong had swiftly fixed the joint dislocation.

Fang Sheng tried taking a couple of steps and is amazed, "Brother Shen, this is miraculous!"

Xiang Shaolong patted the chair beside him and smiled, "Please sit down, I have something to tell Brother Fang."

Fang Sheng's mood has greatly improved for the better. Pleased, he sat down and invited, "Brother Shen please speak your mind!"

Xiang Shaolong extracted the two gold ingots from his bosom. Placing them on his open palm, he presented them before Fang Sheng's eyes.

Feng Sheng's eyes grew as big as saucers. He let out a loud gasp, "Heavens! This is pure gold."

Two simple gold ingots are more than sufficient for an ordinary man to live without worries for the rest of his life.

Xiang Shaolong pressed the gold ingots into his hands and whispered, "They are yours now."

Fang Sheng hesitated for a while and shook his head, "How can I take Brother Shen's gold?"

Xiang Shaolong lied, "I have several more pieces of gold. They were bestowed to me when Prince Wuji knows that he would be sentenced to death soon. Brother Fang, please accept them and use the excuse of your broken leg to leave this malicious place, fulfilling your dream."

Holding the gold ingots tightly in his hands, Fang Sheng is curious, "Brother Shen is not lacking in wealth, why did you choose to lead the life of a carriage

driver?"

Xiang Shaolong continued his bluff, "Honestly speaking, I am making use of this job to leave Daliang (Wei capital). Ever since the death of Prince Wuji, no one dares to employ his ex-family warriors like us. I am not going to live my life without making my mark somewhere. I am therefore heading to Qi to try my luck."

Fang Sheng is so touched he began to tear again, "I am beyond gratitude. With this two pieces of gold and my savings over the past two years, I can finally resign from Miss (Feng Fei) tomorrow."

After some thought, he added, "Why don't we leave together? Sa Li is awfully narrow-minded and he will never let you off. Zhang Quan is only making use of you and even if you died fighting for him, he will not even feel the least bit of sadness."

Xiang Shaolong smiled, "After Brother Fang is gone, I will have no more reservations. Our fall will not be in vain."

Fang Sheng fell into a daze. In this instant, he felt like Xiang Shaolong is much more than who he truly is.

Fang Sheng could not hold back his plans and right that evening, he approached Zhang Quan, asking to leave the troupe because of his leg injury.

Zhang Quan showed no signs of asking him to stay on. On the pretext that he is resigning instead of troupe disbandment, he paid Fang Sheng a few

miserable bronze coins and commanded him to leave the ship early next morning.

An upset Fang Sheng confided in Xiang Shaolong about this issue. Originally, he can still be entitled to a generous dismissal fee for his years with the troupe. Needless to say, Zhang Quan has pocketed most of it. Ultimately, he is not overly concerned about this discrepancy because the two gold ingots are enough to satisfy all his needs.

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong sent Fang Sheng off the ship. While he was hesitating to leave with him, Gu Ming and his gang happened to return to the ship. Mocking them again for their incompetence, Gu Ming and his gang boarded the ship.

With Wei soldiers swarming all over the pier and Zhang Quan staring at them from the ship, Xiang Shaolong suppressed the urge to retaliate. He calmly bade farewell to Fang Sheng and returned to the ship.

The ships began sailing.

Xiang Shaolong can sense his fellow workers and drivers are shying from him as if he is carry a contagious disease. No one wants to converse with him and even Zhang Quan's followers are treating him like trash. He was greatly humoured. Obtaining his breakfast, he hid in a corner of the ship's stern and began eating.

Inside his mind, he was churning ideas on how to create a big hoo-ha, forcing Feng Fei to dismiss him. He can then swagger off to freedom without raising

any suspicions.

However, timing is critical to his plans. Ideally, it should happen before the next stop when the ships dock to replenish their food and water supplies. He can then leave the ship both mentally and physically.

In the beginning, Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty over snatching the original Shen Liang's employment. Now, he felt that he was helping him to avoid a calamity instead.

Gu Ming and his collaborators are likely to have been ordered by Sa Li to get rid of himself at all costs.

That Sa Li is rather good looking and could be using this natural advantage to start a relationship with one of the more influential serving maids. With his increase in influence, he could be conspiring to take over Zhang Quan's job.

Lost in his thoughts, a small pair of shoes suddenly appeared before his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong looked up in panic but his view is blocked by two huge and jutting breasts. In that second, he still has no idea who is this person in front of him. Taken aback, he got on his feet and found out the lady is actually Sister Ling, the attractive serving maid of Second Mistress Dong Shuzen.

Stifling her laughter and after glancing twice at him, Sister Ling coldly hissed, "Are you the trouble maker Shen Liang?"

Xiang Shaolong has already made up his mind to leave the ship and doesn't

bother to give her any leeway. Assuming a domineering stance, he joked back, "Sister Ling gives me too much credit. Without any supporters, how much trouble can I create?"

Never in her wildest dreams would Sister Ling expect Xiang Shaolong to be so rebellious and talked back to her. Her expression changed colour instantaneously and she scolded, "How dare you! Do you know who you are speaking to?!"

Folding his arms across his chest, Xiang Shaolong uttered to nobody in particular, "Every nation has its laws. Every household has its rules. However, some principles are ever encompassing. I am a lone ranger whereas other people are forming cliques and gangs. Sister Ling, why don't you judge from your own conscience who has the potential to be the trouble maker around here?"

Sister Ling is dumbfounded. During a debate, she is light years away from Xiang Shaolong who is used to complex court arguments. Her face turned red in anger, she stared at him for a before her arms went into akimbo position. She screeched, "Are you tired of your job?"

Xiang Shaolong leisurely responded, "Isn't this up to Manager Zhang or Miss Feng?"

Sister Ling is often the one doing the scolding. Now that she has been put down badly by a lowly driver like Xiang Shaolong, she is as mad as a bull and stomped off.

Xiang Shaolong watched as she stomped over to the other side where Gu Ming and his guys were and summoned Gu Mong into the ship's cabin. Acknowledging that a good show is about to start, Xiang Shaolong smiled to himself. He turned to view the beautiful snow scenery on the both sides of the shore.

He is certain that Sa Li has hooked up with the alluring serving maid Sister Ling. He may even enjoy the support of the Second-in-Command Dong Shuzen to openly challenge Zhang Quan's authority.

Just as he was pondering which route to travel back to Qin, someone tapped his shoulder.

Xiang Shaolong turned his head and a family warrior entered his view. He is one of those who participated in escorting Feng Fei last night for her prayers.

The family warrior commanded, "Master Zhang wants to see you!"

Xiang Shaolong noticed that the family warrior dared not look at him straight into his eyes while talking. Easily predicting the situation, he smiled back, "May I know how do I address Brother?"

The man answered, "I am Xu Ran. Come with me!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his adrenaline rushing and his limbs itching for some action. He followed Xu Ran into the cabins.

## **Chapter 10**

### **A Shattered Dream**

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Following Xu Ran, Xiang Shaolong stepped into the cabins and came to a door.

Xu Ran stopped in his tracks and pushed the door inwards. He gestured: “Master Zhang is inside, you can go in on your own!”

Surprisingly, there was no ambush along the corridors. Instead, melodious music can be heard from the upper decks. This is a brilliant situation to trap Xiang Shaolong. Even if he shouted for help, no one can hear him.

Xiang Shaolong grinned and viciously used his own shoulder to smash into Xu Ran’s shoulder.

Caught unaware, Xu Ran called out in shock and stumbled into the cabin.

A black cloth bag swiftly clamped down and enveloped Xu Ran’s head and face. The bag was secured and Xu Ran was dragged deeper into the cabin. Gu Ming, Fu Yan, a few other drivers, Wu Xun and a few family warriors pounced upon Xu Ran, raining merciless, heavy blows on him.

Xiang Shaolong slipped into the cabin and closed the door behind him. Xu Ran is already pitifully writhing on the floor like a freshly cooked shrimp.

These men may be overly excited to carry out their task and did not notice that they were beating the wrong person. Xiang Shaolong and Xu Ran are dressed very differently and have different body builds as well.

Gu Ming was the first to notice that the man standing at the cabin door is Xiang Shaolong and not Xu Ran. Flabbergasted, he pointed dumbly at Xiang Shaolong but no words can come out from his mouth.

By now, everyone realized they have laid their hands on the wrong person.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head slowly and sighed, “Do you know what your mistake is?”

Xiang Shaolong dashed forward and came to the side of the short strongman, Wu Xun, in a flash. Using his momentum, he kneeled Wu Xun in his nether regions.

Back in the 21st century, Xiang Shaolong is an expert when it comes to bar fights. He totally understood the principle - To capture a man, shoot his horse; to nab the thieves, capture the bandit king.

Wu Xun is a strong, well-built and courageous man. Otherwise, he would not possess the strength to push Xiang Shaolong down the gangplank. Therefore, Xiang Shaolong chose to attack him first and attacked his most vulnerable spot as well.

His speed is too incredible and Wu Xun did not have the slightest chance to defend himself.

The next moment, Xiang Shaolong has already slipped in between the two family warriors. Using his two elbows, he strike both men heavily at the side of the rib cages.

These close combat techniques are most applicable while fighting in tight and narrow spaces. It is hard for the opponents to predict his moves and he can easily use the opponents' bodies to shield himself.

Both family warriors cried out in pain and collapsed.

By now, Xiang Shaolong has leapt to the front of Fu Yan. Avoiding a punch to his face, he grabbed Fu Yan's neck with both hands and kneeled him twice below his abdomen.

With another flying kick, he sent another driver soaring through the air. PIAK! The driver hit the ship's wall.

From the upper decks, the music became more lively and high pitched, as if it is cheering Xiang Shaolong.

Out of a sudden, someone grabbed Xiang Shaolong from behind. Releasing Fu Yan and letting him kneel down to the ground, Xiang Shaolong used Judo and flipped the man behind him over his own head, aiming to slam him in the direction of the cabin window.

BANG! The man's spine hit the cabin window frame and the man rolled to the corner of the ship's wall.

Gu Ming and the other two drivers advanced towards Xiang Shaolong. Using hand-grabbing techniques, Xiang Shaolong had a grip on one of the driver's wrist and kicked him twice in his abdomen. The driver bent over in pain.

Tugging the driver with his enormous strength, he managed to cause the stumbling man to crash head on with the other driver. Both drivers collapsed into a tangled heap.

Gu Ming is now facing Xiang Shaolong alone. The two family warriors had managed to get on their feet but were still in a daze.

Gu Ming is mad with fury and anger is glimmering in his eyes. He drew out a dagger from his bosom and launched a piercing attack towards Xiang Shaolong's chest.

Xiang Shaolong faked a movement and avoided the thrust. Using his hand in a chopping attack, he ruthlessly strikes down on his wrist.

Gu Ming's dagger fell to the ground and he stumbled forward. Xiang Shaolong delivered a crushing punch to his back as he fell.

This overbearing driver landed flat on his face and is a pathetic sight to behold.

JIANG! JIANG! The two family warriors have regained their composure and their aggressive spirits have been ignited. Both drew out their swords.

Bloodwave left its sheath as well and turned into a sword storm.

Never in their wildest imagination did they expect Xiang Shaolong to be a godly swordsman. Among cries of panic, their long swords have long left their grasps and their wrists are bleeding.

Xiang Shaolong sheathed his sword and pressed forward, attacking with his iron fists.

Sounds of bones breaking and chilling screams followed. Three punches later, both men can no longer stand up.

As Gu Ming struggled to get up, Xiang Shaolong pressed him against the ship's wall and landed four heavy blows to his abdomen. Gu Ming vomited a mouthful of fresh blood and sat down with his back against the ship's wall. His pain is indescribable.

The cabin door swung open and was continued by Sister Ling's shriek.

Except for Xiang Shaolong, nobody else is able to stand up.

Xiang Shaolong casually clapped his hands and joked, "How are you, Sister Ling? Aren't you going to report me and get me fired?"

Sister Ling's exquisite face has long been drained of any colour and she is still unable to believe her own eyes. Her lips were shuddering and she is speechless at the same time.

One of the family warriors managed to get on his knees but after puking a mouthful of blood, he fainted back onto the ground.

With his piercing eyes shining a deathly aura, Xiang Shaolong advanced towards Sister Ling.

Sister Ling screamed and fled the scene.

Xiang Shaolong stretched his limbs and believed that it is time for him to leave this ship soon.

Xiang Shaolong is standing confidently in the centre of the spacious main hall of the ship.

Feng Fei is wearing her usual veil. Behind her stood Little Ping'er who is still dressed up as a boy.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the second in command of the Song and Dance Troupe, Dong Shuzen. She is sitting beside Feng Fei and standing beside her is Sister Ling, who is still quivering with fear.

Dong Shuzen is around her twenties and extraordinary features lined her face. Her eyes sparkle like Christmas ornaments and are incredibly lively, betraying her intelligence.

The Head Musician Yun Niang (I typo Yun Liang previously) is present too. She is seated on the other side of Feng Fei. Presently in her middle age, she still retains much of her beauty and portrays a sense of maturity that is lacking in

all the young lasses. She is as mesmerizing and alluring as the courtesans.

Zhang Quan is seated on the side with a joyful expression.

Sa Li has been summoned from the other ship to participate in this ‘court session.’ He is seated opposite Zhang Quan and his eyes are filled with hatred. He looked as if he wants to swallow Xiang Shaolong whole.

The two men and three ladies are seated like a fan, converging on the standing Xiang Shaolong.

Kun Shan and the other family warriors lined up two sides of the hall and the entrance of the hall. Although there are more than twenty people of them in the room, there was complete silence, adding to the stifling atmosphere.

Gu Ming, Fu Yan, Wu Xun, Xu Ran and the others have been properly bandaged. Weak and dejectedly looking, they sat on one side of the hall like a bunch of defeated cocks. They look amusing and yet pitiful at the same time.

Dong Shuzen started, “Shen Liang, what is going on? Since you joined our troupe, there have been numerous incidents. Are you aware that our troupe forbids duelling?”

Her voice is sharp, clear and full of energy. Her singing should be delightful to the ears.

Xiang Shaolong swept his gaze over the entire crowd and found everyone has their eyes on him. Only Feng Fei remains unfathomable. He grinned widely

and deepened his voice, replying, "If you wish to know what has happened, why don't you ask Sister Ling instead? She is the mastermind and should know much more than me."

Sa Li interrupted furiously, "Shen Liang, who do you think you are? How dare you be so disrespectful! Kneel!"

Xiang Shaolong's eyes lit up with iciness. He stared incessantly at Sa Li but maintained his silence.

The family warriors supporting Sa Li began to turn boisterous and unruly.

Feng Fei scolded, "Shut up!" Everyone quietened down.

Pressing his hand on his sword hilt, Xiang Shaolong raised his head and laughed, "I'd rather be killed than to be insulted. A man's kneel is as valuable as gold. If you want me to kneel to crooks like Sa Li, you might as well take my life first."

Sa Li stood up immediately and grabbed his sword handle. He grunted, "Then let me take your lowly life."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused, "If you can withstand ten strikes from me, I will kow tow ten times to you."

Sa Li is angry beyond comprehension. His face turned from red to white and red again. However, he dare not draw his sword.

Adding fuel to fire, Zhang Quan egged, "If Assistant Manager Sa possesses excellent sword skills, I, Zhang Quan, will like to witness it."

Yun Niang who has been silent all this while sighed, "You are all noisy and unruly. What is this troupe coming to? How can you solve any issues arguing like this?"

Sa Li took the opportunity to stand down. Boiling with rage, he returned to his seat.

Feng Fei softly decided, "Very good. Now let us understand the whole situation first. Wu Xun, you are the head of the family warriors. Tell me what is going on."

Wu Xun is a simple-minded person and is not good with words. He could not find the words to express himself and his face is beginning to turn red.

Gu Ming intervened, "This matter is started by Shen Liang. We brothers are just enjoying ourselves in the cabin when Shen Liang..."

Little Ping'er called out in interruption, "Miss (Feng Fei) is asking Wu Xun, who are you to speak up?"

A grievous Gu Ming swallowed the rest of his words.

Wu Xun finally found his tongue and replied in an anxious tone, "Yes. Shen Liang barged into our cabin and began beating us up with no rhyme or reason. That is all."

Zhang Quan dismissed, "How would he know that all of you are hiding in the cabin and enjoying yourself?"

Wu Xun is speechless once again.

Sa Li frantically countered, "Is General Manager trying to protect this criminal? It is obviously Shen Liang is the one attacking and injuring all these men. Looking at his disrespectful bearing, you should know he is the reckless perpetrator."

Dong Shuzen began to assess Xiang Shaolong. She frowned, "Everyone keep quiet for now."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she questioned, "Shen Liang, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Xiang Shaolong will definitely not offer an explanation. He behaved like he cannot be bothered and shrugged his shoulders, "I have nothing to add. Second Mistress just have to say it and I will leave the troupe, concluding this matter."

Zhang Quan's face changed colour, "How can you leave without explaining yourself?"

Xiang Shaolong shot him a cold glare and snorted, "Master Zhang is having ulterior motives in hiring me. Now that I have understood your malicious intentions, I will never allow myself to be used by you. What is the point of

staying here?”

Zhang Quan is considerably infuriated that even the green veins on his forehead are protruding. In that moment, his guilty conscience held his tongue.

Sister Ling frostily reprimanded, “You insolent slave, you have injured so many men and there is no way we will let you leave like that!”

Dong Shuzen cut her sentence, “Little Ling, zip it!”

Sister Ling has always enjoyed Dong Shuzen’s affections and is seldom publicly admonished like the present situation. She began to tremble with fear and dared not speak anymore.

Xiang Shaolong is initially humoured and nonchalant, awaiting the decision to chase him out of the Song and Dance Troupe.

He purposely pushed the decision into Dong Shuzen’s authority because he assumed she would shield her own personal serving maid. When he heard her telling off Sister Ling, he began to worry.

The ship’s main hall is filled with total quietness except for Zhang Quan and Sa Li’s heavy breathing.

Dong Shuzen firstly looked at the amazing soundless Feng Fei and skimmed everyone in the room. Finally laying her eyes on Xiang Shaolong once again, she frowned slightly and lectured, “It is no longer the issue of the fighting but

Shen Liang's bad attitude and lack of respect for others."

Pausing a while, she continued, "You are an extraordinary man but we are just a simple Song and Dance troupe, I am afraid we cannot accommodate your talents here, therefore..."

Xiang Shaolong is about to send his thankful prayers to heaven when Feng Fei suddenly spoke up, "Hold it!"

Everybody turned their attention to her in awe.

Xiang Shaolong's mind became agitated. If Feng Fei identified him, his life will turn into hell.

He deliberately changed his voice, posture and with his new appearance, on top of their one and only meeting, by right he should be able to evade her detection.

Under the scrutiny of every eye in the hall, Feng Fei softly sighed, "Who can imagine that there will be so many issues even in a small troupe such as ours. The fault does not lie with Shen Liang but with the management. I have been very tolerant so far but things are really getting out of hand. I will no longer sit back and do nothing."

Xiang Shaolong was consoled that his cover is not blown. Concurrently, he knows that things are not going according to his plans. If he is not dismissed, is he going to Qi instead? Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling's face lost colour upon hearing her words.

Dong Shuzen is feeling uneasy too. She can feel Feng Fei's words are aimed at her as well.

Feng Fei judged, "Shen Liang, you can continue to be my driver with a peace of mind. If anyone were to make trouble for you, you can report to me directly."

Xiang Shaolong was stunned beyond words. He wished he could start crying at the failure of his escape plan.

If he insisted on leaving, doubts will be raised.

Zhang Quan who mistook him for the real Shen Liang now hates him to the core. He may even plot against himself or have misgivings about his identity.

He can only salute and give his thanks.

Feng Fei is now facing Zhang Quan and Sa Li. She gracefully took down her veil, revealed crystal sharp features that can rival Ji Yanran and Qin Qing.

However, her two eyes are frosty and her expression is one of displeasure.

Zhang Quan was terrified and he hastily kneeled down, kowtowing, "I know I am wrong. I know I am wrong!"

Sa Li is still banking on Dong Shuzen's influence and tried to wriggle his way out. He argued, "Mistress, I wasn't on this ship when the incident

happened...”

Sister Ling shrieked, “How dare you talk back like this?”

An annoyed Dong Shuzen commanded, “Little Ling, kneel! From today onwards, you need not serve me anymore!”

Sister Ling petite frame was shaking uncontrollably. She broke down crying.

Sa Li finally came to his senses and kneeled down too, kowtowing non-stop.

Feng Fei plainly state, “At the next stop, Sa Li you better scram. Go as far as your legs can take you. Otherwise, don’t blame me for being heartless.”

Turning to Zhang Quan, she announced, “Taking into consideration all the years you have been with me, and taking into account you realized your mistake, I will only demote you to Assistant Manager. Yu Niang will now control all the finances. Gu Ming and his partners in crime will all be fined a month’s salary. Anyone who opposes will be fired on the spot.”

Finishing, she ignored Sa Li’s pleas and rose, leaving the hall. Even Dong Shuzen was horrified and kneeling on the ground.

Xiang Shaolong has no choice but to kneel down as well. In his mind, he was contemplating to join Sa Li in ‘going as far as his legs can take him’.

Feng Fei’s astute judgment and insight is something he definitely did not anticipate.

## **Chapter 11**

### **River Prisoner**

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After the episode, Xiang Shaolong's status is largely elevated. For a start, he gets to upgrade from his basement bunk to a room in the middle deck. He is now roommates with four other family warriors and no longer face the likes of Gu Ming and the other drivers.

Most importantly, nobody dares to pick on him anymore or even be rude to him verbally. Of course this is not solely based on Feng Fei's warning; it is also due to his assault on Wu Xun and Company.

To a certain extent, he has risen to become the hero of the troupe. Many other colleagues who have been oppressed by Zhang Quan, Sa Li and Sister Ling in the past are now delighted to have Xiang Shaolong vent their frustration.

In the power struggle within the troupe, he is no longer a newcomer but a veteran, a winner. But according to his escape plans, he is the biggest loser.

He is naturally unwilling to be sent to Qi in such a manner but it is suicide to jump into the river and swim away in the middle of winter.

It is still a question if he can successfully slip away at the next landing.

At dinnertime, there is still no one who is courageous enough to strike a

conversation with him. Nonetheless, people are beginning to nod their head to acknowledge him and their body language is friendlier.

Xiang Shaolong relished his peace.

When most of the troupe staff retreated back into their rooms to avoid the cold winter wind, he sat alone on a pile of goods at the ship's tail. He stared blankly at the gorgeous scenery on the two riverbanks under the starry sky.

Three other big ships are following closely behind.

Remembering his lovely wives and son in Xianyang, now further and further away from him, and recalling Zhou Liang and the Eagle King's tragic death, as well as his soldiers dying one by one beside him, his chest swelled up with intense emotions and he nearly wanted to shout his lungs out.

Li Mu taught him the bitterness of defeat in war.

But he does not hate him, nor bear thoughts of revenge.

Li Mu did mention, "If we ever meet on the battlefield, there will be no mercy." Li Mu's words felt fresh in his mind, as if it was only spoken to him yesterday.

Now that he is unaccounted for, will Xiao Pan be miserable or secretly celebrating? At the end of the day, Xiang Shaolong represents Xiao Pan's past.

Without Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can be the Great Qin Shihuang without any reservations.

Xiang Shaolong is having conflicting thoughts.

Xiao Pan is changing every day.

In the history of China, every warrior who assisted his Lord significantly never enjoys a good ending, unless he betrayed his lord to be King.

Therefore, he exercised utmost caution in this aspect. He seldom claimed credit for his achievements but he somehow became a centre of power regardless and exerts notable influence over this future Qin Shihuang.

He knew Xiao Pan since his teens; will he be able to avoid this unfortunate tradition? Deep in his contemplations, a gentle female voice sounded beside his ear, "A penny for your thoughts?"

Xiang Shaolong broke out of his stupor and turned his head around. It is the recently promoted, Lead Musician Yu Niang.

He hurriedly got up and paid his respects.

Yu Niang stepped to his side, shoulder-to-shoulder and sighed, "Are you enjoying the scenery here in loneliness because everyone else on this ship is terrified of you? First Mistress (Feng Fei) and I saw you from the upper decks and it is she who asked me to speak to you."

Xiang Shaolong observed at her carefully. This lady should be twenty-seven or twenty eight years old. She maintained her beauty well and her silky skin is comparable to a much younger girl. Her well-defined features are peppered with small signs of aging but she has a more womanly feel. He was mesmerized momentarily. Yun Niang saw him staring at herself and smiled, "Looking at how intoxicated you are earlier, I am sure you enjoy countless days of glory serving Prince Xinling. Out of his three thousand family warriors, being his personal driver is an accomplishment already. Now, no one will belittle you."

Xiang Shaolong recollected the gratitude and enmity between him and Prince Xinling, his bright eyes revealing signs of melancholy. The usually calm and composed Yun Niang was struck by his expression and her heart is beginning to stir. She can feel herself becoming more and more attracted to this man.

Xiang Shaolong caught Yun Niang averting his own gaze and thought to himself, "Even she is afraid of me?"

He sighed: "To be loved everywhere you go or to be feared everywhere you go, which is a better choice?" Yun Niang discovered she cannot relate to Xiang Shaolong as a plain subordinate anymore and his words have aroused her interests. Pushing back her delicate hair which has been blown out of place by the wind, she replied without thinking: "Needless to say, it is better to be loved." Her face reddened when she finished speaking.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, "This is the mindset of the young and inexperienced. It will be great to have both but that is impossible. I will choose to be feared; at least that keeps me safe."

Yun Niang was stunned at his words. A long while later, she confessed, “You thinking is indeed unique but not without reason. Many who have hurt me in the past are people who loved me. Ai. For your level of talent, why are you contented to be a simple driver?” Even she herself could not comprehend why she is discussing intimate matters with a subordinate.

Xiang Shaolong of course does not suffer from any inferiority complex.

To a modern man from the 21st Century, every human being is equal.

In reply to her question, Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed, “Luck comes in cycles.”

Yun Niang will never fully understand his true intentions but after spending some time to grasp the meaning of his words, she was moved, “What an excellent way to describe the factor of luck in our human lives!”

Reluctantly, she bade: “I have to go and report to Miss.”

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to enquire, “Are we docking soon?”

Yun Niang responded: “Are you thinking of heading to shore to entertain yourself? Not on this stop. We will reach Li Xia tomorrow but will only dock for two hours. Except for those purchasing supplies, nobody else is permitted to leave the ship. I have to go!” Watching her sashay away, Xiang Shaolong groaned inwardly. Looks like he has to postpone his escape to the stop after the next.

As expected, the ship docked the next day. From the deck, Xiang Shaolong can see the pier swarming with Qi citizens, from commoners to officials. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of Feng Fei and even the City Mayor personally came on board to pay his respects to Feng Fei, giving Xiang Shaolong no chance to slip away.

He is beginning to grow impatient. This ship resembles an open concept water borne prison to him.

The sole consolation is that throughout these days on board, he has fully recovered from all his ordeals. He looks much better than he was when he was still a fugitive. His skin is no longer coarse and yellow and he is no longer all skin and bones.

On the way back to his room, he bumped into Zhang Quan. He gave Zhang Quan a venomous look but Zhang Quan only smiled in return.

He is now quite friendly with the four family warriors and he tried to ask more about the next pier stop.

One of them named Fei Sun laughed, "Brother Shen must thinking about girls."

This Fei Sun is of middle build, which means he is shorter than Xiang Shaolong by an entire head. With average looks and an easygoing character, he makes everyone around him feel comfortable. Just turning thirty, he is the eldest among the four family warriors.

Another family warrior named Feng Liang answered, “We will be docking at Di City the day after tomorrow and it will also be the last stop before we reach Lin Zi (capital of Qi). If you guys want to have some fun, this is it. I’ve heard about massive inflation in Lin Zi and we likely cannot afford the fun there.”

Feng Liang is a twenty-year-old lad, tall and muscular. He is only shorter by Xiang Shaolong by a few inches and is the most knowledgeable among the four.

Another family warrior is named Lei Yun’er. Younger by Feng Liang by two or three years, he is born with long limbs and resembles a primate with a shapely body. Due to him hooking up with an influential serving maid, he behaves in a superior manner. Despite treating Xiang Shaolong as a friend, he is still demeaning in some ways.

He snorted in boredom, “Who says you need money to get chicks? Watch how I do it when the time comes.”

Fei Sun and Feng Liang stood up to protest and the three men are having a noisy banter.

Xiang Shaolong remembered himself and his drinking buddies Little Zhang, Man Niu and Xi Pao back in the 21st Century. The atmosphere is similar and he immediately felt a sense of warmth. When men get together and engage in idle chatter, the topics will hardly deviate from women and money.

Di City is his last chance of escape.

If he arrived in Qi's capital Lin Zi, it will be several times more treacherous.

Just based on Tian Dan's subordinates alone, several of them can easily identify him.

The worst circumstance is that as Feng Fei's driver, he will have to drive her to and fro all the residences of the rich and powerful. His fake identity will be easily exposed and the menace that follows will be overwhelming.

He was about to turn in when there was a knock on the door. A serving maid came looking for Xiang Shaolong, announcing that Feng Fei wants to see him.

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise. His heart began to beat faster and faster. Why would Feng Fei want to see a lowly driver like him?

The maid leading the way look slightly familiar and Xiang Shaolong instantly remembered that she is the fierce \*\*\*\*\* who scolded him on the first boarding day. He asked: "How do I address Elder Sister?"

The maid coldly hissed, "Why do you have so many questions? Why are you so talkative? When you meet Mistress later, you better know what's good for you. If you infuriate her, you will be having endless trouble in your life."

From her barrage of words, Xiang Shaolong predicted that she is either on Sister Ling's side or even a close acquaintance of her, which explains her dissatisfaction with him. He could not be bothered to see eye to eye with her

and smiled silently. They ascended to the upper decks.

Feng Fei is without her veil and is sitting serenely in a special seat in the centre of the ship's hall.

Xiang Shaolong paid his usual respects before sitting down on a floor cushion as gestured by Feng Fei. The cushion is about five feet away from her.

The vicious maid took her leave and only the two of them are left in the hall.

The attraction between males and females is a naturally occurring phenomenon.

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and feasted his eyes on this grand beauty.

Her sitting posture alone is already exceedingly enthralling. Feng Fei is in a long and wide highly quality silk dress than covers her legs and feet. Parts of the dress that went beyond her feet are folded nicely to her left. Although she was sitting down, her back is straight like a pencil, causing her breasts to become more prominent. It was a proud yet elegant pose. Any ordinary man will be tempted to touch her and it must be a heavenly feeling to touch such an extraordinary beauty.

Her hair is tied up into a bun and her expression is peaceful and gentle. Xiang Shaolong finally understood why Tu Xian praised her as 'A beauty inside and outside.'

Placed beside her is a 5-string zither. The strong wooden smell and the deep wooden colour contrast well with her white dress, embroidered with a yellow phoenix, increasing her attractiveness.

This will be the perfect sitting portrait. It transcends pure beauty and is more like a work of art, a poem.

There is a pot of burning wood in the hall and the occasional cackling sound from the fire, coupled with the sounds of waves hitting the ship, formed a melodious tune.

Even a strong willed man like Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart slowly melting away in from of this enchanting beauty.

It is no surprise why she the head of the Three Courtesans.

No wonder the number of Kings, Marquises, Generals and Lords who succumbed to her looks are immeasurable.

As long as she paid a little bit more attention to anyone is more than enough to send them into ecstasy.

As he was fighting his own agitations, Feng Fei plainly asked, "How did Prince Wuji die?"

Xiang Shaolong raised his sense of awareness, lowered his head and replied in a pained tone, "If Mistress had asked me the same question in Daliang, I will never give an honest answer."

He continued speaking with great emotion as if he was there to witness the entire scene, “Anli that incompetent King is gravely ill and is about to pass on. Lord Longyang and Crown Prince descended upon our Residence with a large army, delivering a single cup of wine. Prince Xinling summoned us batch by batch to give instructions about his funeral and his will. He then drank that cup of wine. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he must tell a detailed story or he might arouse the suspicions of this intelligent beauty. Thus, he cooked up the whole fairy tale to avoid her pressing for other facts.

As anticipated, Feng Fei did not show any signs of disbelief. She lightly sighed and did not speak further.

Thinking at the speed of light, Xiang Shaolong suspected that Feng Fei might be interviewing him now to test her theories.

Nevertheless, he is confident to smoke his way through. Although they had an unplanned encounter with dim lightings and his dressing and posture are now vastly different from before. He has a face full of beard now and is still about 5kg thinner than before. The best cover for him is that Zhang Quan hired him from the official stables of Wei. Of course no one will expect such an incredible turn of events except for Xiang Shaolong.

Feng Fei laid his eyes on his face and softly asked, “Shen Liang, are you really just an ordinary driver for Prince Wuji?”

Xiang Shaolong was slightly taken aback but his quick thinking mind has already produced a story for him. He confessed, “Mistress is indeed sharp. I used to be working for the great Zhao General Lian Po. With General Lian, we left Zhao to depend on Prince Wuji. I became his family warrior and I thought I could make a name for myself. But heaven has other plans for me and I became a destitute in Daliang. After these two upheavals, I harbour no more ambitions. All I wish is to make my fortune, find a rural village and live a simple life until I die.”

Feng Fei was impressed, “Heaven has other plans for me. What an excellent saying. It manages to convey a sense of helplessness and disappointment in it. Brother Shen, your encounters are definitely lamentable, but if it is not too meager for your worldly talents, how would you like to be my troupe General Manager?”

Xiang Shaolong feigned embarrassment and lowered his head, imploring, “Since when do I deserve Mistress to call me Brother? Moreover, I am still a newcomer and don’t command the respect of the troupe yet. Mistress, please reconsider your decision.”

Feng Fei smiled, “I have toured all the seven states and have met all kinds of people. You are someone who does not succumb to pressure, can hold your ground and exceptionally self-assured. From these I can tell that you are not used to a lowly position. Ai! You reminded me of someone I once met in Xianyang. If not for Zhang Quan vouching for your identity, I would have made a mistake.”

Xiang Shaolong was shocked but he pretended to be keenly interested,

enquiring: “Do I really resemble your friend?”

Feng Fei scrutinized him carefully and her eyes showed signs of uncertainty. She dreamily replied: “There is a certain resemblance, especially your eyes. But even without Zhang Quan’s verification, I also know that you cannot be him. There is news from Zhongmou that he has safely returned. It is amusing how Wei nearly combed every inch of Daliang just to find out that it is a mistake. Of course they cannot find their target!”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by a realization. He is certain that Teng Yi and Jing Jun have received news from Jing village about his whereabouts. They deliberately create a smokescreen; spreading rumours that he is safely back in Zhongmou. This will convince his enemies to give up searching for him. This is a truly brilliant strategy. All they have to do is find Wu Guo or someone with a similar built as him and with simple disguise make up; he can pass off as Xiang Shaolong when viewed from afar.

The only person who saw him in Daliang is Lord Longyang, who is in a dilemma as well, for if he tells the truth he would also be blamed for letting Xiang Shaolong escape.

Ultimately, Lord Longyang is still loyal to him. He did not contest the rumours and kept quiet, indirectly giving him a lifeline. Regarding the secret palace tunnels, they may still be undiscovered or even when discovered, may not be linked to him, as the idea would seem too far-fetched.

With all these new information entering his brain, Xiang Shaolong can finally smell salvation, the light at the end of the tunnel. Invigorated like a new man,

he held back his joy and mentioned instead, “Mistress must be referring to Xiang Shaolong of Qin.”

Feng Fei looked at him emotionally, her eyes betraying her longing for that encounter, but she kept quiet.

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong recognizes that Feng Fei has some feelings for him and is greatly honoured.

Feng Fei gently revealed, “After my visit to Lin Zi, I would have accomplished my dream of touring all the States. I will disband the Song and Dance Troupe, return back to the South and live an ordinary life.”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, “So Mistress is intending to retire.”

Feng Fei lightly smiled, “I am not somebody who can sit still in one place. Since I cannot conquer the world through power, I shall influence the world through my music, glorifying the songs and dances left behind by our ancestors. This trip to Lin Zi will be a rather challenging one. Someone has leaked the news that I am going to disband my troupe after visiting Lin Zi. Now everyone is watching my every move. Brother Shen should know what I mean.”

Xiang Shaolong was baffled, “Since this is the case, why doesn’t Mistress abandon this trip? All your problems will be solved, wouldn’t it?”

Feng Fei simply countered, “If I did not cover Lin Zi in my tour, it will be like a missing jig saw puzzle, I will never live it down. Moreover, isn’t life about

meeting challenges and not running away from challenges? If I back out now, I will live in regret for the rest of my life.”

Pausing, she added, “Talented men like you are not easily acquired. Why don’t we trade our dreams? When Brother Shen successfully assisted me in leaving Qi safely, and not condemned to be someone’s mistress or concubine, I will reward Brother Shen with twenty ingots of gold, securing your livelihood for life.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a headache coming. Firstly, he himself is unwilling to go to Lin Zi. Even if he somehow made it there, he will do his utmost to stay low profile to avoid detection. As the General Manager of the Song and Dance Troupe, he has to face the likes of Tian Dan, as well as the dignitaries of Qi on a daily basis. He, too, has to manage the duties of the managing the troupe and prepare counter tactics to protect Feng Fei’s chasity. Taking up this job is as good as offering his neck to the executioner’s sword.

Simultaneously, he can understand Feng Fei’s predicament.

As long as the Song and Dance Troupe is touring the States, they cannot be violated. But once this protective status is gone, every man will wish to bring this fresh flower home to his bedroom.

These is a unique culture and attitude; provided that Feng Fei keeps the same distance from everyone and maintain her neutrality, she can maintain her individual status. Upon disbandment of the troupe, she becomes available to the public and men will definitely fight over her.

Her considerations are not without reason.

Xiang Shaolong can only bitterly smiled, "Mistress is giving me too much credit."

This is not something he can accomplish by sheer might, but rejecting her will seem inappropriate too. Looks like he has to harden his resolve and help her out.

He was in a dilemma.

Feng Fei soothingly state, "If you are not willing to help me, do you think Zhang Quan is up to it? At least you are someone who is not easily bribed. I have zero confidence in Zhang Quan's integrity."

She then sighed, "At the end of the day, we are just womenfolk. We need you to handle all those stinky men."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "If Mistress had keep this disbandment a secret, wouldn't you have avoided all these trouble?"

Revealing a pained expression, Feng Fei lamented, "I intentionally shared this secret with someone close to me and mislead her into thinking that she is not the only one who knows, testing her honesty. Now, we all know the truth and while it did endanger my life, it was worth it."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, "Is it Second Mistress?"

Regaining her calm, Feng Fei nodded, “All along she has been wanting to take over my position; in a world where men call the shots, it is an uphill task for women to stand out in any career. The only exception is the Song and Dance Troupe. She is second in authority after me and will naturally want to get rid of me.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested: “Why don’t you just let her take over the Song and Dance Troupe?”

Feng Fei explained, “This is a highly complicated problem. When I first started out, I promised all my followers that upon disbandment, everyone would receive a generous payout. Ai! We all know an entertainment career is short lived. When we have made enough money to retire, who would want to continue slogging? Therefore, Dong Shuzen has to try to wrest control of the Song and Dance Troupe from me before I disband.”

Lingering, she added, “In actual fact, you have already helped me a lot by giving me a chance to chase Sa Li away. However, Dong Shuzen is now in cahoots with Zhang Quan, Brother Shen should understand my difficulty.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his troubles piling up. He pretended to accept the promotion.

His contradictory situation and suffering is indescribable.

He could not bear having such a gifted, outstanding and gorgeous lady getting into harm’s way and falling into the claws of someone she do not love.

## Chapter 12

### Meeting a Friend in a Foreign Land

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The next morning, Feng Fei assembled everyone from the Song & Dance Troupe, including the courtesans and management staff like Zhang Quan, announcing that she is making an exception and promoting Xiang Shaolong to be the General Manager, and is charged with all matters pertaining to the troupe.

Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan were astounded but dared not oppose.

The first to congratulate him is Yun Niang, who also whispered into his ear, “You should thank me for your promotion.”

She wants Xiang Shaolong to know that she is Feng Fei’s confidante and is the one secretly encouraging Feng Fei to promote him. Xiang Shaolong doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry instead.

This is also the first time he set his eyes on the other eleven courtesans besides Dong Shuzen. Each and every one of them is a peerless, fascinating beauty, causing him to lose his bearings.

However, most of them are nonchalant about Feng Fei’s promoting Xiang Shaolong and their expressions remained unfazed.

One of the leggy courtesans Zhu Xiuzhen even looked at him with disdain.

There are a total of one hundred and eighty troupe staff.

Feng Fei is at the top of the hierarchy.

Below her would be the courtesans and musicians, headed by Dong Shuzen and Yun Niang respectively. A staff of serving maids attends to them.

Except for a few men who are musicians, the entire group is made up of females.

The management of the troupe, both internally and externally falls on the shoulders of himself and his assistant Zhang Quan. Family warriors, drivers, male servants and porters all fall within their jurisdiction, forming a government-like organization.

Zhang Quan's supporter Kun Shan leads the family warriors while the drivers are led by Gu Ming.

These two men, in addition to the grudge-bearing Zhang Quan, are enough to give Xiang Shaolong a really big headache.

He could not wait to make his escape this instance, but burdened with this heavy responsibility and Feng Fei's high expectations, he could neither advance nor retreat, and nearly wanted to cry his heart out.

Something good that comes out of it is that Zhang Quan is now deployed to the other ship and Xiang Shaolong has a single cabin all to himself on the

second deck. When Yun Niang came a knocking, he is mentally prepared to receive certain benefits from her, at a cost.

On the pretext of handing over work to him, Yun Niang entered his room and there is no way Xiang Shaolong can reject her.

After handing over her work to him, a courageous Yun Niang enticingly look straight into his eyes and cooed, "All right, how is Manager Shen going to thank me now?"

Her expression reminds him of Zhu Ji (Qin) and Madam Zhuang (Chu).

For (sexually) experienced and mature women like them, when they take an interest in someone, sex is all that they will pursue and they are very open and direct about it. On one hand is to satisfy a human need, on the other hand, they are more senior and cannot be bothered with the wild fantasies and cumbersome dating process of the young men and young women. They will take the most practical route to satisfy their needs.

From a men's point of view, Xiang Shaolong will not mind having a friendly match with this sexy lady and is confident of giving her a session she will never forget and wonderful memories to last her lifetime.

Nevertheless, in the present situation and while he is planning to flee, it is not wise to get involved in a relationship.

He knows himself best. When he has made love to a woman, he will certainly be emotionally attached to her. This burden is something he can do without

for now.

If he just did her and left, he will absolutely feel guilty about it in the future.

Unless of course, if she is in the flesh trade. That will be a different case altogether.

He found it difficult to reject her on the spot and used a delaying tactic instead. Suppressing his own manly reactions to her advances, he changed the topic and smiled, "I am obviously grateful to you, but I have a question that I hope you can enlighten me!"

Pleased, Yun Niang prompted, "Please go ahead and ask. I will tell you everything I know."

Judging from her body language and tone, it is evident that Xiang Shaolong can do whatever he wants with her. Xiang Shaolong can feel his loins stirring and was about to lose control. Warning himself to behave, he asked in an official manner, "Wherever the Song & Dance Troupe travels to, we will attract all the lustful men. For Miss Feng it is definitely not an issue but when someone wants to woo our courtesans, what should I do?"

Yun Niang gave him a meaningful look and answered, "The scenario you articulated happens rather often but our Courtesans are not prostitutes. If any man wishes to gain her heart, he will have to put in considerable effort. For example, inviting them to banquets, using ways and means to make them happy, and try to see if they will reciprocate. These kinds of arrangements are beyond Mistress's control and unquestionably beyond your league."

Xiang Shaolong is curious, “So are there any courtesans who got married and left the troupe?”

Yun Niang nodded, “Yes there are, but the numbers are limited. What is so good about marrying the rich and powerful? Before they bed you, you are treated like a queen. After they lay you, your value is gone. In addition, you have to become enemies with the other wives and concubines that they married. Staying as a courtesan is much more comfortable. When you have made your fortune and returned to your village in glory, you can marry whoever your heart fancies.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement, “Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea. For a girl to have such insight is truly brilliant.”

Yun Niang’s eyes lit up. She praised, “Marrying a rich man is like falling into the sea; what an excellent expression! I must tell Mistress about it. She is writing a song about a pitiful wife. This line can be one of the lyrics.”

Xiang Shaolong can only smile bitterly to himself.

Yun Niang became more aroused and moved closer to Xiang Shaolong, where her long dress is touching his kneecap. She divulged, “On this trip to Lin Zi, we are also participating in a competition with two other famous Courtesans, which explains why Mistress is very anxious. She will not want to lose to Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang at Henggong Pavilion and Qixia School respectively.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that these two other ladies whom he has encountered before are going to Lin Zi as well.

Qixia School is naturally the headquarters of Qixia Sword Saint, Mister You a.k.a. Cao Quidao. Not recognizing Henggong Pavilion, Xiang Shaolong sought the answer from Yun Niang.

Yun Niang sweetly replied, “Henggong Pavilion, also known as Huan Pavilion, is a grand conference hall in the Qi Palace. When Henggong is in power, he loved to hold lavish banquets there, hosting his officials as well as visiting diplomats. Hence, it became the name of the Pavilion. Courtesans who have never performed at Henggong Pavilion before are not considered prestigious.”

Hearing her explanation, Xiang Shaolong is filled with a yearning to take pay a visit to the place. In this period of the Warring States, Qi is considered one of the bigger states with rich cultures and tradition. Since he is passing by, it will be a pity to give it a miss. However, preserving his life is more critical. He lost the mood to tour the place and reminded himself to stop thinking about it.

Yun Niang leaned onto him and gently commented, “The King of Qi is rather generous, paying us 200 gold ingots for two shows. When we arrive, you must remember to collect this payment from him.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. It is an astronomical amount in these ancient times. He realized the people of Qi are squandering away their nation’s wealth. The same amount of money can pay for a year’s wages for five hundred soldiers.

Yun Niang coaxed, “I have told you everything; you have yet to tell me how you are going to show your thanks.”

Since there is no way he can avoid the situation, Xiang Shaolong decided to cast aside all his reservations. Snaking his hand to hug her thin waist, he was about to pull her into an embrace when the ship suddenly braked to a stop. Moments later, it began sailing at a much slower pace.

Both of them are startled. They will only reach Lin Zi tomorrow. Why did the ship suddenly stop? Ahead of them, shining lanterns can be seen.

Using this distraction, Xiang Shaolong jumped up and went to his window, looking out. It appears that there is a huge ship ahead of them and is intentionally slowing down for their ships to catch up.

By now, Yun Niang has squeezed to his side, her petite frame prostrated on his body, trying to catch a glimpse.

Xiang Shaolong mused, “I wonder who is the owner of that ship?”

Yun Niang scrutinized the flags hoisted at the tail of the new ship. She abruptly shrieked: “Mister Tan is here! He is on board the ship of the Imperial Physician of Han.”

From her exhilarated and glowing expression, Xiang Shaolong believed that this Mister Tan has an unusual relationship with Yun Niang.

Men are really \*\*\*\*\*s. He initially regarded Yun Niang's passion as his misfortune and treated her as a platonic friend. Seeing her excited and horny as a \*\*\*\*\* in heat, he knew that his 'love rival' has appeared, evoking pangs of jealousy. With a sour taste in his mouth, he inquired: "Who is Mister Tan?"

An elated Yun Niang has forgotten all about her plans to seduce Xiang Shaolong. She merrily chirped: "Among the gifted men within Lord Nanliang's Residence, Mister Tan is the most talented man in terms of poetry and music. He is a trusted confidante of Lord Nanliang as well. He did mention coming to see our performance at Lin Zi and here he is! I must tell Sister Feng (Fei)!" Finishing her sentence, she exited his room in a flash, ignoring Xiang Shaolong completely.

Xiang Shaolong can only look on as the door slammed in his face with a 'bang!' In the same instant, he could feel something weird rousing in his mind.

Lord Nanliang's name rang a bell, but whom did he hear it from?

The gap between the two ships is slowly closing.

Feng Fei and her fellow courtesans are all gathered on the deck, enthusiastically awaiting the arrival of Mister Tan. It appears that this poetry and music prodigy holds an important place in their hearts.

Yun Niang is the most fanatical of them all, waving her hands harder than all the courtesans.

Illuminated by the moon and lanterns, several men can be seen on the facing side of the new ship. They are waving energetically in response and the atmosphere is remarkably lively.

Ropes with grappling hooks are tossed over from the other ship. Xiang Shaolong hastily directed the family warriors to hang on to the ropes, pulling the ships even closer together.

The ships slowed down to a snail's pace.

When the ships come close enough for him to look at the faces of the other party, Xiang Shaolong's body shook uncontrollably. He has just seen a friend that he has missed for many years.

When the friend happened to lay his eyes on Xiang Shaolong, he was stunned as well, and his body shook uncontrollably in response.

This friend is none other than Xiao Yuetan.

Xiang Shaolong finally solved the mystery. It was Tu Xian who told him about Lord Nanliang.

Upon reaching Han (State), Xiao Yuetan became Lord Nanliang's family warrior. With his many hidden talents, it is no surprise that he managed to gain the affections of the courtesans.

LONG! The two ships lightly collided and after a series of tremors, are finally lined up side by side.

A gangplank came over from the new ship and lodged onto their ship. Xiao Yuetan was the first up the gangplank and strode over with a few of his followers. He first winked at Xiang Shaolong before laughing happily, coming to Feng Fei. He paid his respects to her, praising, "Since we parted last Spring, it has been a year since we last met. Miss Feng's spellbinding song and dance performance still occupies my thoughts and dreams. To think I can have the fortune to meet you tonight on this river. The Heavens have been really kind to me."

Leading the courtesans in returning the courtesies, Feng Fei smiled, "The meeting in Han was a most memorable event for me as well. A stimulating conversation that went on till night has benefitted me tremendously. Since we are lucky enough to run into Mister tonight, we must be a good host and treat Mister Tan and our other guests to a cup of tea in our ship hall."

Xiao Yuetan signaled to his men on his ship to retrieve the ropes and gangplank before leading his followers, together with Feng Fei, into the ship hall.

Xiang Shaolong is craving for a good talk with Xiao Yuetan but he can only suppress this desire for the time being. He felt relieved as well. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan's authority and achievements, he is certain that Xiao Yuetan is doing very well under Lord Nanliang. Otherwise, he would not be able to commandeer a ship to fulfill his date (with Feng Fei), coming all the way to Lin Zi to watch The Three Courtesans Grand Competition.

All the jealousy in his heart has effortlessly vanished and he wondered how

many other courtesans as his playboy friend tried aside from Yun Niang. When the two ships are separated, Xiang Shaolong went to the ship's hall, wanting to check out Xiao Yuetan's situation.

At the entrance of the ship's hall, he can see Xiao Yuetan introducing his three followers to Feng Fei. They are all important men working for Lord Nanliang. From their appearances, Xiang Shaolong can tell that they are very knowledgeable.

Feng Fei, Yun Niang and the courtesans are seated on the left while Xiao Yuetan and his men are seated on the right. Yun Niang went to the extent of personally serving tea to the four men and never stopped batting her eyelashes at Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan saw him at the door but pretended to ignore him.

Xiang Shaolong was aware that his status is below that of the people in the hall and was contemplating to enter or leave when a maid standing behind Zhu Xiuzhen (courtesan) came over, disparaging him, "This place is none of your concern, please attend to your other matters instead!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his blood boiling. He cast his view to Zhu Xiuzhen, who did not even care to return his gaze. Contempt, however, is written all over her face. Enraged, he softly grunted to the maid, "Scram!"

The maid panicked and upon seeing the cold rays emanating from Xiang Shaolong's eyes, her face became drained of colour and she subconsciously took two steps back.

This is precisely why Xiang Shaolong believes that it is better to be feared than to be loved. He strode right into the hall.

Feng Fei noticed him coming and felt awkward due to his inferior status. She introduced with a frown, "Shen Liang is our new General Manger. Come and greet Mister Tan."

Xiao Yuetan stood up and exchanged greetings with Xiang Shaolong at the same time. He laughed, "Brother Shen has an remarkable appearance. We must get to know each other better."

The three men escorting Xiao Yuetan are baffled. Xiao Yuetan is a proud character and seldom exhibits such warm gestures to anymore, moreover to lowly manager of a Song & Dance Troupe.

Even the founder of Shi Sufang's Song & Dance Troupe, Boss Jin, Jin Chenjiu has a much lower status compared to Shi Sufang. In the eyes of the rich and powerful, he is just a manservant with some influence. Shi Sufang is one of the other Three Courtesans.

Dong Shuzen, Yun Niang, Zhu Xiuzhen and the rest were equally mystified, unable to comprehend Xiao Yuetan's respectful treatment of Xiang Shaolong.

Only Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan know the underlying reason; and it is becoming quite challenging to conceal their excitement after seeing each other once again after some many years.

Xiao Yuetan invited Xiang Shaolong to sit down beside him and to avoid

suspicion, he chatted up Feng Fei instead of him. Their topics hardly deviated from music composition, lyrics writing and poetry.

Xiang Shaolong knows nuts about these subjects and cannot join in the conversation.

Xin Yue, a petite courtesan who is a few notches prettier than Zhu Xiuzhen, commented, “I hear Mister Tan is an avid collector of folk songs and folklore. Among all the State Poems & Songs (Book collection), the Songs of Qi (book) is one of the more exciting. Mister will not leave Qi empty handed on this trip.”

Xiao Yuetan’s three associates are completely intoxicated with Feng Fei’s charm. One of them, Zongsun Heji, a fine-looking scholar chuckled upon hearing her words, “Mister Tan has made two trips to Qi in the last few years. His collection is long completed!”

Xiang Shaolong knows Xiao Yuetan’s character and that he detests dirty politics. He must have focus his abilities on poetry, music and the art, which unexpectedly turned out to be a good career move for him.

Dong Shuzen is elated, “Mister Tan must share with us what he has learnt.”

With one hand stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan looked exceptionally dashing, reminding Xiang Shaolong of the first time he saw him in Handan (Capital of Zhao).

After so many years, he is likely to be in his forties by now but still

maintained a robust and youthful disposition. It is no wonder why Yun Niang is so smitten with him.

After humbly excusing his incompetence (a polite gesture), he smoothly articulates, “Folk songs and folklore naturally embodies the local culture and heritage. Stories of joy and sorrow are common; while the most touching are the works of love and war. A broken man misses his wife; a chaotic country misses its generals. True love exists in every suffering. That is life.”

Yun Niang suggested, “The lyrics in folk songs are the bravest and most direct. The people of Qi reside near the sea and are very open-minded. The Songs of Qi must be highly explicit. Why doesn’t Mister Tan sing us a few lines to broaden our horizons.”

Faced with the pleading of the girls, Xiao Yuetan tapped the table and sang, “鸡既鸣矣，朝既盈矣，匪鸡则鸣。苍蝇之声。东方明矣，朝既昌矣。匪东方则明，月出之光。虫飞薨薨，甘与子同梦。会且归矣，无庶予子憎。”

This song describes an emotional scene, where two lovers are meeting in a bedroom on a quiet night. Cursing the rooster, which crows at sunrise, waking them up from the sweet dreams, the lady persuades the gentleman to leave but the gentleman insisted it is the flies buzzing instead. When the lady pointed out that the eastern horizon is lighted, the gentlemen asserted it is moonshine. At her wit’s end, the lady swore to continue sleeping with him if it is genuinely the flies buzzing but if he stayed on when he should be leaving, it will invite rumours.

The tune is simple, ordinary and easy to understand. The lyrics are sincere and yet exciting, portraying a real life situation and the descriptions are very lifelike. Sung by Xiao Yuetan's soulful and jazzy voice, everyone present is moved.

Even Xiang Shaolong is captivated by his singing when an angelic voice arose from Feng Fei's mouth, continuing the song and pairing the story,  
“东方之日兮，彼姝者子，在我室兮。在我室兮，履我即今。东方之月兮，彼姝者子，在我闼兮。在我闼兮，履我发兮。”

Her song describes a rendezvous from the gentleman's point of view, singing about a beautiful lady entering his house at sunrise and joining him. Why did she come? Was it a coincidence or was she attracted by my singing, that she joined me on my journey.

This is the very first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing her sing. He finds her voice especially unique and is quite unlike the singing of Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang. Compared to the other courtesans he has heard of in the past, Feng Fei is light years ahead.

Not only is she a great singer, she does not follow the normal singing styles and has a rebellious streak. Her sentimental singing is like floating on water among streamingly colourful rainbows and fluffy clouds, carrying deep, unfathomable emotions. Her voice has a wide variation and she can reach all the different pitches. Merging her breathing into her singing, the lure of her song is limitless. She paints a mind-blowing picture with her lyrics and like a magnet, attracting all her listeners to pay full attention to her singing.

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan and everyone else was cheering madly when she finished.

Xiao Yuetan was not the least upset Feng Fei stole his thunder. He frankly queried, "I have never heard of this song before. I wonder if this is Miss Feng's latest production?"

Feng Fei humbly replied, "It is indeed my new work. Please pardon my inadequacies."

Xiao Yuetan and everyone were full of praise.

Seated on the other side of Xiao Yuetan, a strongman Youji sighed, "I have long heard about Miss Feng's divine singing. Now that I have finally met you and heard your singing, I can die without regrets."

Feng Fei modestly responded, "Mister You is giving me too much credit."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Feng Fei deserves her title of the Head of the Three Courtesans and enjoyed first class treatment from the rich and powerful of every State.

Everyone will appreciate and treasure a talented beauty.

But if she officially retired, it will be a different story altogether.

Compared her brilliance, Dong Shuzen and the other courtesans are like the little stars beside the bright moon.

Xiao Yuetan professes, “The four of us are highly envious of Brother Shen. If you offer your job to the four of us, I can guarantee we will come to blows fighting for it.”

Awaking from his stirrings, Xiang Shaolong laughed, “Mister Tan sure knows how to crack a joke. This is actually the first time I am hearing Mistress sing a song!”

The four men were shocked; but only Xiao Yuetan’s shock is faked.

Yun Niang explained the recent developments to them.

Zongsun Heji used this occasion to test Xiang Shaolong’s abilities, “Does Manager Shen have any comments?”

Xiang Shaolong said the first thing that came to his mind, “Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth.”

This time, even Feng Fei is moved.

Guilt ridden, Xiang Shaolong admitted, “I am just a greenhorn when it comes to music, but Mistress’s song has made me lost my bearings.”

Youji was amazed, “No wonder Mister Tan has such a good feeling about Brother Shen. Mister Tan is an excellent judge of character. Brother Shen’s eloquence is seldom sighted. ‘Greenhorn’, ‘Lost my bearings’, these are all very appropriate and well-suited descriptions of the actual situation.

Needless to say, the ‘Such a song belongs to the heaven and not the earth’ is a flawless depiction.”

Xiang Shaolong knows it is not good to reveal too much about himself and kept quiet. He dared not face the attention that everyone is suddenly showing in him, especially from Feng Fei.

Dong Shuzen commented, “Mister Tan’s earlier piece of Qi Song is immensely compelling. When Kong Qiu visited Qi and listened to a local music performance, he was so absorbed that his food was tasteless for three months and he called it the Perfection of Music.”

Xiao Yuetan jested, “When I saw Miss Dong’s 9-movement Dance last year, my food has remained tasteless ever since!”

Everyone had a good laugh. Dong Shuzen is rather pleased, having gained some acknowledgement.

Xiang Shaolong realized that Dong Shuzen is able to become Second in Command of the Song & Dance Troupe is due to her terrific dancing skills.

It was soon midnight and the four men were unwilling to take their leave.

Yun Niang is especially reluctant for Xiao Yuetan to leave. She sighed, “How I wish the ship is bigger, we can spend more time on the cruise and learn more about ancient cum modern music from Mister Tan.”

Youji enthusiastically hinted, “As long as we have a bed to sleep on, we

would be more than happy.”

Dong Shuzen suggested, “We cannot subject you to such inconveniences. Nonetheless, we can probably create some additional sleeping quarters if gentlemen can lower your expectations...”

Zongsun Heji and the others were overjoyed and agreed in unison.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong hinted, “I am staying alone, why don’t ...”

The experienced Xiao Yuetan easily caught the hint and laughed, “Let me share the room with Brother Shen and learn more phrases from him. We can send for our gear tomorrow.”

Back in the room, they blew out the candle and sat down on a corner of the cabin floor, reminiscing about the past.

Deep into the night, Xiao Yuetan has finished listening to Xiang Shaolong’s fugitive encounters. He advised, “When Shaolong leads his army to war, there is no one who did not panic in the eastern states and there is a fear of your prowess everywhere. Even when you are alone without your army, you still create chaos wherever you go. Presently, Han, Zhao and Wei have laid heavy defences and ambushes on your returning path to Qin. It is too risky and not worth it to return to Qin straightaway.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “Any reaction from the people of Chu?”

Xiao Yuetan answered, “Absolutely no reaction from them. A man’s heart is

difficult to fathom and travelling through Chu may still not be safe. If you ask me, Shaolong should lie low and avoid the heat. When the three states are fully convinced that you have returned to Zhongmou, I can leisurely escort you back to Qin.”

Pausing, he added, “I will have my confidantes report to Master Tu at Xianyang and he will relay the news to Yanran that you are safe with me. You can put your mind at ease and stay in Qi for an extended period.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded, “You could recognize me without much difficulty, what about other people?”

Xiao Yuetan examined his face carefully and diagnosed, “You have kept a beard and with your loss in weight, your appearance has been altered significantly. I can recognize you because I caught you staring at me first and I am been worried about you for the past two months. Never forget that I am a master of disguise and with some modifications, for example, trimming your beard, varying your hairstyle and letting you wear a headdress, I can guarantee that even Tian Dan cannot recognise you even if you stand face to face with him. After all, no one is more familiar with your physical features than I.”

Pausing again, he laughed, “If you can learn the art of stuttering from me, there will be no more loopholes left in your disguise. As a manager, you will only interact with Tian Dan’s followers so please do not be overly worried.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his body being rejuvenated, gaining a new lease of life.

Honestly speaking, he cannot bear to part with Feng Fei too. He does not bear any ulterior motives towards her but merely desire to see her in action and at the same time, protecting her and assisting her to leave Qi unmolested.

He wondered, “If you are going to make changes to my appearance, wouldn’t it raise any suspicions within the Song & Dance Troupe?”

Xiao Yuetan coolly assured, “We can make gradual changes to your looks so the change will not be too obvious. They will probably associate the change due to your beard trimmings. Relax! Shaolong should know what I, Xiao Yuetan, is capable of.”

Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong calmly laughed, “I have no doubt about your abilities and in fact, my greatest admiration lies in your skirt-chasing skills.”

Xiao Yuetan gushed, “Are you referring to Yun Niang and (Dong) Shuzen? These two b!tches are super horny when the right buttons are pressed. Feel free to try them out for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished, “You even managed to try Dong Shuzen?!”

Xiao Yuetan clarified, “Dong Shuzen has been laid by several men; this is hardly anything new. Her escort fee is the highest among all of them and one night with her will cost you an arm and a leg.”

Xiang Shaolong scowled, “What is the difference between them and

hookers?”

Xiao Yuetan enlightened, “Of course there is a difference. You must first win their favour and gain their affections before you can make the deal. The liaising contact used to be that bastard Zhang Quan, and you are now the new contact.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted, “You mean I am now a pimp? A Papa-san (male version of mama-san)?”

Xiao Yuetan is confused, “What is a pimp? What is a papa-san?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled, “Forget about these boring stuff. Who else will be coming to Qi to take part in the festivities?”

Xiao Yuetan coldly laughed, “Lu Buwei is one of them. With him around, you can be sure of trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly had a brainwave. He recalled Dan Meimei mentioning that the Crown Prince of Qi has yet to be chosen. In this juncture, the twisted hand of fate has miraculously drawn him into another life changing episode.

Isn't Qin at war with the Five States? Why is it possible for Lu Buwei to saunter into Qi in such a carefree manner?

In the same line of thought, the news-less Shan Rou came to his mind.

Will he see her in Lin Zi?